

Talking to children about death and dying

It is natural for children to ask questions about death and dying. Adults may sometimes, in their wish to protect a child, find it uncomfortable to do so.

In our experience, children are able to cope more easily when they are given age- appropriate, factual answers to their questions. Listed below are the types of questions that children may ask, and some ideas of ways in which you could respond.

Why do people die?

All living things will die one day. (You can mention flowers, pets etc.)

When we are alive our bodies have to work very hard. Each part of our body has a different job to do; to help us breathe, think, feel, move, grow, eat, see, hear, touch, smell, taste, play and work.

For instance, our muscles help our bodies to move, our hearts pump blood around our body, our blood carries oxygen and food energy to every part of us, and our brain sends messages to different parts of our body giving us important information.

When we get old our bodies start to wear out, and then they can no longer do all the hard work that we need them to do to keep us alive. This can happen when we have a serious illness too.

Usually, people live for a long time and die when they get old.

Sometimes though, people die before they get old. This can be because they have had an accident or because they have a serious illness. (You can explain how doctors can usually make us better when we are ill, but there are some illnesses that we are still learning about and that doctors aren't able to make us better from).

There may also be other reasons why someone might die suddenly, for example violent death or suicide. (You can name these if you think it is appropriate.)

What does 'dead' mean?

When someone dies, their body stops working and it can't do any of the things it used to do. Their heart stops beating and they can no longer breathe. Their brain no longer sends or receives messages from other parts of the body. A dead person cannot move, think, feel, see, hear, or do any of the things that a person who is alive can do.

Does it hurt when you die?

When someone is seriously ill, or has had an accident, doctors give them medicine to stop them feeling pain. When someone dies, their body stops working and that means that they cannot feel any pain.

What does someone look like when they die?

They may look nearly the same as they did when they were alive, only they cannot move and they will be cold to touch.

When someone dies their eyes are usually closed, which can make them look like they are sleeping. (It is important to make the clear distinction between death and sleep, as children may worry about going to sleep themselves.) When someone dies they are not sleeping – their body has stopped working and they can no longer do any of the things that an alive person can do.

We have a separate information sheet called 'Viewing the Body' that may help families who are considering taking a child to see a loved one's body.

What happens to someone after they die?

If you have spiritual or religious beliefs, you can explain these to your child. If you are not the child's parent or carer, you will need to check what their family's belief systems are. You may need to answer in a more general way, or ask the child what they think happens. You could say something like:

'Different people believe different things. Some people think that when you die your soul or spirit goes to heaven, others think that you are remembered in the hearts of those who love you, others believe you are born again (re-incarnated).' However, some people do not have any spiritual or religious beliefs.

What happens to the person's body after they die?

When we die we do not need our bodies anymore. Some people choose to have their body buried; we put their body in a special box or basket called a coffin, and then the coffin is buried in the ground.

Other people choose to have their body cremated. Their body is put into a coffin and taken to a place called a crematorium, where it is turned (by a special fire) into ashes. The ashes are then put into a container which can be buried in the ground, or scattered in a place that is special to you.

We have a separate information sheet called '**Children and Funerals**' that may help families talk to children about the funeral process.

If you would like help or advice about talking to a child about death and dying, please contact our Therapeutic Practitioners on 0118 934 2604.

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