

# Talking to Children About Death

**Adults often tell us that talking about death and dying can make them feel uncomfortable. However, children need to know what has happened and to be told the truth. They need clear information, reassurance, involvement and the opportunity to express feelings. If at all possible, it is preferable that this comes from you. Children can overhear conversations and quickly become confused and anxious. This anxiety can make them reluctant to ask questions and they may then use their imagination to fill in the blanks, often compounding their confusion.**

Help them recognise that death is a natural part of life and to appreciate that some things in life can never be fully explained; that grown-ups do not always have the answers (e.g. if God is good, why do bad things happen?) Remember it is not always necessary, or possible, to have all the answers.

When talking to a child, use straightforward words like 'dead' and 'dying' as using words such as 'loss' may lead children to think that the person is wandering around somewhere unable to find their way home. It may also lead them to think that the person can be found.

Talking to a child about death does not make things worse, but ignoring it can be isolating for the bereaved child.

It is important to be open and honest with children at an age appropriate level, you may find it helpful to refer to our 'Responses of Different Age Groups' sheet which gives information about the way children of different ages understand death and bereavement.

Listen to your child and gently encourage them to talk. It is often the case that children may not wish to talk in the early stages, so it is important that they are not pressured to do so. Even very young children can understand that someone important is missing and need to have this explained to them.

You may notice that children sometimes express their feelings through difficult behaviour and it may happen at times when you feel least able to cope with it. Help them to understand that it is OK to cry and to show difficult feelings. Help them to find ways of doing this that are not disruptive or destructive.

It can be positive to share your grief with them, as long as you don't expect them to look after you as much as you look after them. Remember that their experience of bereavement may differ from yours, this does not mean that one of you is right and the other wrong.

Children can switch off from grief and then switch on again later. This may seem strange to an adult who feels that they are themselves stuck for a long time in one mood. It is not unusual for a child to be upset or angry one moment, only to be asking 'What's for tea?' the next. This does not mean that they don't care about what has happened, just that they are processing the information differently.

Give them the information they need to begin to understand the bereavement. Don't flood them with unnecessary details, but pace it according to their interest and need. Share books and talk about the information in them.

Try to avoid keeping secrets from them; let them know what is happening and allow them to contribute to decision making. Children may want to be involved in decisions about the design of a headstone, other commemorative tributes and sorting through possessions.

Keep in touch with your child's school and share information with their teachers to enable them to be more supportive in the classroom. It may be that your child's memory, concentration and performance at school could be affected in the short-term.  
If you are concerned about your child, please get in touch.

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