

Talking to Kids About Death



A GUIDE FOR GROWNUPS

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Introduction

It's normal to be uncomfortable talking to kids about death and loss. You might be unsure what to say. You may not want to talk about it to protect your child.

Children can be vulnerable to the pain of loss. But they are also stronger than we think. With support, some kids can be even more resilient than adults.

Why is it so hard? Death and grief are tough topics for everyone. Grownups have a hard time talking to each other about death. We may be grieving, too. How can we give kids comfort and hope while we struggle with our own emotions?

This booklet is a tool to help you talk about death and grief with children of all ages, whether you are a parent or any adult who knows a child facing loss. It can help with an expected loss or a death that has already happened.

Each section provides helpful tips on what you can do. Look for the ... and ⊗ symbols for ideas on what to say and what to avoid saying. If you have questions or need more support, please contact us. We are here for you.

“The fact is that child rearing is a long, hard job, the rewards are not always immediately obvious...and parents are just as human and almost as vulnerable as their children.”

— Dr. Benjamin Spock

Talking to Kids About Death

How do you explain things in a way kids can understand? Will talking to children make them more sad or scared? What if your child asks questions you cannot answer? How you talk to your child depends on:

- Their age
- Their developmental (emotional) level
- Their relationship to the person who died
- How the person died
- The family's cultural / spiritual / religious background

Every child — and every loss — is unique. Even children facing the same loss may have different needs. This section provides tips to keep in mind when talking to kids at any age. Adjust your approach as needed. Each child is different, and you know your child best.

Communication

- **Be open with your child to build trust.** Kids know more than we think. Hiding the truth can cause mistrust and anger — now or in the future.
- **Let children know it's okay to ask questions.** Their questions can guide the talk. Give honest, simple answers.
- **It's okay to say, "I don't know."** You don't need to have all the answers. What matters most is that you are there. Just sitting with your child or giving them a big hug might be all they need at that moment.
- **Be honest about your feelings.** It's okay to shield children from your darker moments of grief. But talk to your child about how you feel. Let yourself cry in front of them. This shows your child it's okay to do the same.

Emotional support

- **Ask open-ended questions** to better understand your child's feelings.

... What you can say: Start your questions with "How—" "What—" or "Tell me about—."

- "How are you feeling?"
- "What do you think about what happened?"

⊗ What to avoid: Questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

- "Are you (sad, angry, etc.)?"

- **Validate all your child's feelings.** Let your child know it's normal to have all kinds of emotions.

... What you can say:

- "It's okay to be (sad, angry, etc.)."
- "It's normal to feel that way."
- "I feel (sad, angry, etc.), too."

⊗ What to avoid: Telling the child how they should/ shouldn't feel or that you know how they feel.

- "You must feel so (sad, angry, etc.)."
- "Don't be (sad, angry, etc.)."
- "I know exactly how you feel."

- **Try not to burden grieving kids emotionally.**

Relationships between family members can change a lot when someone dies. Kids may ask, "Do I still have a dad since Dad died?" or "If my sister dies, will I be the baby?"

... What you can say:

- "It's hard with Dad gone, but I'm here for you."
- "Even though your sister isn't here, you will always be her big brother."

⊗ What to avoid:

- "You're the man of the house now."
- "Mom's not here, so make sure you take care of your little brother."

- **Watch out for guilt in older kids** (elementary school age and older), especially if they were involved with the death. Assure them it wasn't their fault. Kids can also feel guilty for things they thought or said before the person died.

... What you can say:

- "It was an accident. *Anyone* can have an accident. There was no way to know he was going to die."
- "It's normal to be mad at someone when you have a fight. Angry words can't cause someone to die. She knew you loved her very much."

Caregiving

- **Tell kids they are protected and cared for.** Teens need to hear this, too. Take time to connect with your child, so they don't feel overshadowed by the person's death.

... What you can say: "I will take care of you and keep you safe. You are so special, and I love you so much!"

- **Stick as close to your child's routine as you can.** Ask others for help. If you can't stick to the routine, that's okay. Get back on schedule as soon as you can.
 - Keep wake time, meals, activities, naps, and bedtime around the same times.
 - Get kids back to their regular schedules with daycare, school, or afterschool activities.
 - Older children and teens may need time to adjust before getting back into their routines. Let them be the guide, but watch for warning signs (see page 9).
 - Ask a neighbor, friend, or family member for help if the person who died was a big part of your child's routine. Tell your child what to expect ahead of time.

... What you can say: "I know Grandma took you to soccer practice. I talked to Keisha's mom, and she can take you for now."

Age Groups

This section provides tips based on the child's age. If you have children in different age groups, keep talks appropriate for the youngest child in the room. Have one-on-one time with older children later.

Infants and toddlers (birth – 2 years)

How they might react:

- Infants and toddlers do not understand death.
- They can sense when adults are sad or upset. They may respond to the changes in people around them.
- This age group is most affected by changes in daily routine. Separation from caregivers can cause anxiety.

What you can do:

- **Try to keep the daily schedule the same.** Routine is most important to infants and toddlers. If it is just not possible, make a new routine and be consistent with it.
- **Provide plenty of chances for play.** Set up art supplies and sensory toys. Toddlers may not be able to talk a lot or ask questions. But they can express their feelings through creativity and play.
- **Read to your child.** Choose colorful children's books about death. Introducing these themes early on can help with talks later. Sitting with young children to read can give them the comfort and connection they crave.
(Reading age-appropriate books about death and dying can be helpful for all kids. See page 20 for suggestions.)

Preschool (3 – 5 years)

How they might react:

- Preschoolers may know about death through TV, nature, or a past loss of a family member or pet.
- They don't understand that death is final. It is normal for this age group to keep asking where the person went or when they are coming back, even if you already told them the person died.
- Preschoolers do not understand what causes death. They might make up stories about how and why people die. They might imagine death is a monster, like a ghost or a skeleton, which can cause fear or nightmares.
- Young children may not cry or seem upset. They may go about their day or start to play. This doesn't mean they don't care. They're processing the news in their own way.
- This age group is also affected by changes in routine. Some may regress with thumb sucking, baby talk, being clingy, tantrums, or potty training.

What you can do:

- **Be prepared to answer the same questions over and over again.** Give the same answer each time. Young children aren't looking for more meaning. They just need to keep hearing the answer to understand it.
- **Set out coloring books, art supplies, dolls, and toys to encourage creativity.** Play is an important tool to help kids process emotions. Watch what they draw or act out. This can give clues about their thoughts and fears.
- **Avoid euphemisms** (changing words you use to try to soften the message).

- What you can say: Speak in direct terms.
 - Use the words "death," "dying," and "died."
 - If the person died of an illness, be specific. "Paula had a very serious disease called cancer."
- What to avoid: Anything that might cause confusion or fear of everyday events.
 - "They are at peace now." (*What does this mean?*)
 - "She went to sleep." (*Will I die if I go to sleep?*)
 - "He went away." (*I don't want you to go to work!*)
 - "She was sick." (*My mom has a cold, will she die?*)

Elementary school (6 – 10 years)

How they might react:

- This age group understands death is final but may think it only happens to other people.
- They might feel guilty for causing the person's death with words, thoughts, or actions.
- These children may worry that they will be left alone. They might get clingy or nervous. Changes in behavior may affect school, friendships, and afterschool activities.

What you can do:

- **Prepare to give this age group more details.** They may have more questions you can't answer.
- **Check in with your child often.** Give them plenty of chances to talk about their feelings and ask questions.
- **Keep in touch with other adults** such as family, teachers, and coaches. Tell them what happened. Ask for updates if they notice big changes in your child's behavior.

Middle school & high school (11+ years)

How they might react:

- This age group has a more adult understanding of death. They may grieve more like adults, but it's important to remember they are not adults. Pre-teens and teens still have their own unique way of processing grief.
- Pre-teens and teens may feel alone and alienated from peers. The loss may make them feel like they stand out. Feeling different can be upsetting for older kids who just want to fit in.
- They may have more physical symptoms than very young children, such as stomachaches, headaches, etc.
- They may have more emotional symptoms and less control over mood swings. They might have a hard time concentrating in school or have trouble sleeping.
- Like adults, they may have waves of grief triggered by anything that reminds them of the person. This can be hard to handle when it happens during school or important events.

What you can do:

- **Check in with your pre-teen/teen often.** Tell them you are there if they need to talk.
- **Do not force your child to talk** if they need space. Try not to take silence or angry outbursts personally.
- **When you do talk, practice active listening.** Rephrase and repeat what they say to show you are listening. Do not give advice unless they ask for it. Avoid lectures.

... What you can say: "If I understand, you seem really angry with him. How can I best help you right now?"

- **Watch for warning signs** your child may need extra support, such as:
 - Big drops in grades
 - Loss of interest in activities
 - Risky behavior
 - Major changes in behavior
- **Keep behavior in check but avoid being overly protective.** Find a balance between giving them the freedom to be a pre-teen/teen and setting healthy limits.
- **Consider contacting a counselor** who works with grieving teens. Contact us if you need a referral. You might also look for trusted resources online, such as those listed on page 20.

Special needs & developmental disabilities

This group may need extra support. Using tips across different age groups might be helpful. Tailor your approach to your child's needs.

It's a good idea to ask a professional who works with special-needs children for information on how to talk about death with your child. If you already work with a counselor or specialist, they may have resources. If you need help finding support, let us know.

Preparing for the Talk

It always helps to have a plan when breaking bad news. Try to prepare ahead for the talk, if possible. This section gives you tips on *Who*, *When*, *Where*, and *How*.

If you're reading this booklet, you might have some time to prepare. If there was no time to prepare and you already talked to your child, you can use these tips for future talks.

This is the start of "The Conversation" about life — and the end of life. The hope is this conversation will grow and change over time. Even though it might seem hard, getting comfortable talking about death with your child can be a gift now and in the future.

Who

- **Who will break the news?** This person should be an adult the child trusts.
- **Does this person have support** if they need it? Give them a copy of this booklet to start. Be sure they know enough about what happened to answer basic questions.

When

- **Talk to your child as soon as possible.** You want to be the first to break the news. This is important if you have older kids who have access to texting and social media.
- **Set aside plenty of time to talk.** Let your child have enough time to process the news and ask questions. Avoid talking right before you have to leave or just before bed.

Where

- **Choose a calm, quiet spot** where the child feels safe. Turn TVs and music down or off. Put down phones, tablets, or other distractions.

How

- **Give your child comfort items** such as toys, blankets, etc. If you have pets and are at home, let them in the room. This can be helpful for older kids, too.
- **Sit close** to your child or hold hands.
- **Make eye contact** and speak with a gentle voice.
- **Start with the basic facts** of what happened.
 - Younger children will do best with small bits of information at a time.
 - Older children will want more details.
- **Pause often** to let your child process and ask questions. Check in with younger children to make sure they understand.
- **Be prepared to have many short conversations.** Younger children may have more questions later, sometimes at random moments.

Simple Answers to Big Questions

Common questions children ask are below. This section provides simple responses for young children. These examples might help you find your own words.

Again, adjust your answers for your child's situation. Answers for older kids and teens can be more detailed. Older kids might even offer answers of their own.

Will I die?

- ... What you can say: "All living things — people, animals, plants — will die one day. We're all part of the circle of life. You are young and healthy. So we expect you to live for a very long time."

Will you die?

- ... What you can say: "I'm healthy, so I expect to live a long time. If something happens to me, Uncle Jesse, Aunt Jodi, and Nonna will take care of you."

List family members and close friends who will be there to help them. Have a plan and talk to the people on your list. This can give children comfort knowing people they love are there for them, too.

How do people die? / What happens when they die?

- ... What you can say:
 - "People die when their bodies stop working. Death can be caused by an accident, a very serious disease, or getting very old."
 - "When a person dies, their heart stops beating, they stop breathing, and their brain stops working. All of their organs stop working. They can't feel anything, move, talk, eat, or think."
 - "None of this bothers someone who has died. They are not in pain, cold, hungry, or uncomfortable at all."

What happens to people *after* they die?

... What you can say:

- “A dead person doesn’t need their body anymore. Most times, a funeral home will take the body. The funeral director will prepare the body for the funeral.” (Tips for funerals are on the next page.)
- “Some people think there is a part of us that exists after our body dies called a ‘soul,’ ‘spirit,’ or ‘energy.’ Some people think our souls live forever in a special place. Other people believe the person lives on in our memories and hearts.”
- You might want to tell your child your beliefs. “I’d like to think that...” “I believe...” “I’m not sure what to believe; what do you think happens?”

If you have religious beliefs you want to share, choose your words carefully. If in doubt about what to say, ask a trusted leader in your spiritual community for advice.

... What you can say: Read quotes from your religion’s sacred text, and break them down into simpler words and ideas.

⊗ What to avoid: Be aware ideas you find comforting might cause fear or confusion.

- “The angels took him home.” (*Isn’t this our home? I’m scared of angels! Will they come to take me, too?*)
- “She’s happy to be with God now.” (*If she’s happy, why are you so sad? I want to be with God so I can see her!*)

“The trouble with life isn’t that there is no answer, it’s that there are so many answers.”

— Ruth Fulton Benedict

Talking About Funerals and Memorial Services

If it comes up, you might talk to your child about memorial services and funerals. Let your child know what to expect, keeping things simple for young children. Below are ideas on what to say and other tips.

How you might describe a funeral

... What you can say:

- "A funeral is an event to honor the person who died. It might be held at a funeral parlor, cemetery, or church. Many people there will be sad and cry."
- "Some families choose to bury the body in a peaceful place called a cemetery. First, the body is put in a special box called a coffin or casket."
- "People might read special words or play music at the funeral. Then the coffin is buried in the ground at the cemetery. A gravestone with the person's name on it will mark the spot. People can visit this place to remember the person."

How you might describe cremation

... What you can say: "Some people choose to turn the body into ashes. A special container, called an urn, holds the ashes. They can keep the urn at home or at a cemetery. Some scatter the ashes in a special place."

For a viewing or open casket

... What you can say: "Grandpa's body will be there. The people at the funeral home will pose his body and dress him in nice clothes. We can look at it or touch it gently if we want. It will look like him, but it will probably look a little different."

For a celebration of life or memorial service

... What you can say:

- “Memorial services are gatherings where we can remember the person. We’ll have food, talk to friends and family, and tell stories about Grandpa. Some of us will probably cry. There might be smiles and laughter, too, when we talk about good memories.”

What you can do:

- After your child knows what to expect, ask them if they want to go. Let your child be the guide, if possible.
- If your child wants to come to the service (or if you have no choice but to bring them), ask an adult the child trusts to be there in case you feel overwhelmed.
- If your child does not go to the service, ask if there are other ways they want to be involved. Kids could:
 - Pick out photos, a reading, or music for the ceremony
 - Draw a picture or write a poem to read
 - Choose one of the person’s favorite foods for the celebration of life
 - Suggest a favorite memory of the person to share with friends and family

“It’s a pleasure to share one’s memories. Everything remembered is dear, endearing, touching, precious.”

— Susan Sontag

Traumatic and Stigmatized Deaths

Talking to your child about a traumatic death (such as a murder) or a “stigmatized” death (which other people might unfairly judge, such as a suicide) might seem impossible.

All the tips in this booklet can still apply in these cases. Being open and honest is always the main goal, but it can be much harder to do. You may also be dealing with your own strong feelings or mixed emotions about the person’s death.

What you can do:

- **Keep answers short and simple for younger children.** They do not need a lot of detail. Then you can shift focus to good memories of the person if you wish.
- **Give as much detail as you think is appropriate.** If you don’t think your child is ready to hear everything, that’s okay. Follow your instincts.
- **If your child asks a question you’re not ready to answer, say you will tell them in time.** Then be sure to follow through.

... What you can say: “I’m not quite sure how to explain things to you right now. I’m having a hard time talking about it. But when you are a little older, I promise we can talk about it more.”

- **Break the talk up into steps** (see the next page). Young children may only need steps 1 and 2. As they get older, go to the next step.

Simple language examples to explain an overdose are provided. These might help you think of ways to explain other types of death. Let us know if you need help talking to your child.

How to break your talk up into steps:

1. Tell your child the person died.

... What you can say: Remember to use the words "dead" and "died."

2. Give brief facts about the death.

... What you can say: "Uncle Allan died this morning. He was at home. Aunt Marisol is very sad."

3. Say how the person died in direct terms.

... What you can say: "Uncle Al died from an overdose."

4. Give more details and explain how the person died in simple language.

... What you can say:

- "Doctors sometimes give us drugs to help our bodies. But taking too many drugs or drugs that a doctor did not give us can poison our bodies."
- "An overdose is when someone dies from taking too many drugs. That's what happened to Uncle Allan."

5. Talk about what to expect next and what will happen in the future.

... What you can say:

- "Police officers might come to talk to Marisol about Uncle Al. Don't worry. Your aunt is not in any trouble."
- "Aunt Marisol and your cousins are going to live with Grandma for a while. We are going to help them pack this weekend."

Supporting Children Through Grief and Loss

A good way to support grieving children is to model healthy grieving habits for them. Sometimes it helps to grieve together. You might be surprised to find your child comforting you at times. This can be healing for you both.

What you can do:

- **Understand that grief is a process.** A person (no matter their age) may never completely heal from grief. But it might not hurt as much over time.
- **Tell your child there is no set time frame for grief.** For some, it takes a long time. For others, it takes less.
- **Let your child know that feelings of grief are unique** for everyone. The way each person expresses their grief is also unique.
- **Allow your kids to be kids.** Let them play, have fun, and laugh. Children will switch between normal periods and periods of grief. Joy and laughter can help ease the pain of grief, if only for a moment.
- **Check in with your child as special dates approach,** such as birthdays, holidays, graduations, weddings, or anniversaries.

It's normal for grieving people at any age to be extra emotional on important dates. Sometimes you won't know why until you realize what day it is. The year of "firsts" after the loss can be very hard. Grief from losses years ago can also come back on special days.

- **Ask children how they would like to honor the person.** Some ideas are below. Children often come up with their own creative ideas.

- Do something the person loved to do: watch their favorite movie, play their favorite music, eat their favorite meal, or do any activity they enjoyed
- Draw/color pictures or write something creative for the person; older kids might post on social media
- Visit the grave or a place that was special to the person
- Volunteer for a cause in honor of the person

- **Give your child thoughts of hope for the future.**

… What you can say: “I know this is a tough time. But I am here for you, and we are in this together. If we’re ready, maybe we’ll do something special this summer. What are some things you’d like to do?”

- **Watch out for signs your child may be struggling.** It’s normal to see changes in your child right after a loss. But if they do not improve over time, you may need more support. Some signs include:

- New challenges at childcare or school
- Getting too much/too little sleep; intense nightmares
- Big changes in behavior
- Unchecked anger or issues with friendships and other relationships
- Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities the child usually enjoys
- Health problems

- **It may be hard, but try to take care of yourself, too.**

Keep in touch with family and friends. Ask for help when you need it. Drink plenty of water, eat well, and rest. Take each moment one step at a time.

Resources

Below are resources you may find helpful. Contact us if you need more information. We may have other resources or direct you to the right support group. **We are here for you, your child, and your whole family.**

Helpful websites:

National Alliance for Grieving Children, www.childrengrieve.org
Raising awareness about the needs of grieving children and teens

The Dougy Center, www.dougy.org
A national grief center for children and families

Open to Hope Foundation, www.opentohope.com
Helping people find hope after loss

The Compassionate Friends, www.compassionatefriends.org
Support for families experiencing the death of a child

Girls and Boys Town National Hotline, www.yourlifeyourvoice.org
Support for teens struggling with grief, depression, and other challenges

Courageous Parents Network, www.courageousparentsnetwork.org
Support for families and providers caring for children with serious illness

Suggested books:

- *Evan and the Skygoats*, by Vanessa Vassar
- *Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins*, by Enid Samuel
- *The Invisible String*, by Patrice Karst
- *Lifetimes*, by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen
- *The Memory Box*, by Joanna Rowland
- *Teen Grief Relief*, by Drs. Gloria and Heidi Horsley
- *Water Bugs and Dragonflies*, by Doris Stickney
- *When Dinosaurs Die*, by Laurie Krasny Brown
- *When Someone Dies*, by the National Alliance for Grieving Children




Questions and Notes:

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