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# Grief Talk: Telling a Child Someone has Died



## Introduction

Telling a child that someone they love has died is a painful task we all hope we never have to deal with. Unfortunately, as death is a part of life, we are likely, as caregivers, to find ourselves in this role. As with any challenging conversation, this presents opportunities to deliver the news in a way that strengthens our relationship with the child and leaves them feeling safe, secure, and nurtured.

## Before the Conversation

Resist the urge to protect the child from the pain of the loss by avoiding the conversation. Children deserve honesty, especially with difficult conversations, and honesty is critical to sustaining the trust between you as the child grows. Children must learn the news of a death in an intentional and direct conversation with a trusted parent or adult.



### **Plan for the location, timing, and setting of the conversation.**

Think about what space the child feels most comfortable in, such as a favorite room or space in the home.

**Pay attention to your own emotional state.** If you can, allow yourself time to think through what you will say before you deliver the news. Emotional reactions to painful news are natural, but it is important for you and the child to feel safe in the moment. The child may take their cue from you about how to react to the situation. It is important to take care of yourself before the conversation to ensure emotional safety. Deep breathing, relaxation, and meditation exercises are helpful ways to practice self-care before the conversation.

**Consider your child's age and development.** Every child is different. Age and experience play a role in how they will react to the news that someone has died. [Click here to learn more about developmental understandings related to grief and children by age group.](#)

In preparation, gather:

- Items such as blankets or stuffed animals that help your child feel secure and comforted.
- Children's books about death, dying, grief, and loss can be used to help you start the conversation.
- Playdough, art supplies, or toys to occupy their hands to help them cope during the conversation and allow your child to express their feelings after the conversation.

## Having the Conversation

Having the conversation may be the most difficult step in telling a child someone close to them has died. As a caregiver, it is important to be mindful of any emotions you are feeling as children are perceptive of non-verbal messages from adults and may observe them during the conversation.

As you are speaking with your child:

- Take your time. Pauses can help reflect on a child's response and your emotions.
- Use direct language such as death, died, etc. and provide simple and brief explanations and simple examples for the child to understand.
- Review the child's understanding of death.
- Answer any question the child may ask and say, "I don't know" to the questions you don't know how to answer.

**It is important to normalize the child's feelings.** Explain to them it's okay to feel sad, scared, confused, glad, angry, etc. You can offer support by sharing how you are feeling. Share your feelings with the child and a way of coping. It gives a child permission to express their feelings and help them understand feelings will come and go.

**Educate the child about family rituals after the death.** Share any beliefs or traditions that are part of the child's family or culture.

**Identify support.** In addition to parents and caregivers, it may be helpful to help the child identify other adults to provide support.

**Help say goodbye.** Another important piece of the conversation is educating the child on the importance of saying goodbye. Give them some examples, such as writing a letter or drawing a picture.



**It's okay to show your emotions during the conversation.**





## After the Conversation

Remember, every child reacts differently. Some kids cry, some ask questions, and others seem to not react at all. Each response is okay. Stay with the child to offer reassurance and be open to answering questions.

Children may have a number of emotions, including but not limited to shock, fear, anger, guilt, or even relief. These feelings are normal. You may find some children don't seem to show these at all. Try to reassure them it's okay to have different feelings. They may experience grief through behavioral shifts, including trouble sleeping or finding it hard to concentrate. Children may be clingier and need more attention. They might begin to worry about losing someone else in their life. Reassure the child they are loved and will always be cared for. It may help to rely on family members.

## Things to Consider

Children as young as two will assume the care of an adult who is grieving. They do not want to cause hurt to those close to them, so their emotions are often hidden.

Maintaining as much routine as possible, even a simple meal and bedtime rituals, will help children of any age be aware of their support people, feel secure, and believe there is hope. Other routine activities include taking family walks, going on bike rides, or just playing outside.







# Considerations for Every Age Group

## Considerations for Young Children (2 to 6 years)

- Conversations should be brief, honest, frequent, and include something for a child to play with, such as figures, medical play sets, ambulance, crayons, and blocks.
- Explain “dead” means the body has stopped working. They are not “sleeping” (fear of going to sleep), have not “gone to a better place” (i.e. Disneyland), are not “lost” (‘we have to go find them’).
- At this age, death is ‘reversible’. Use examples in nature, such as flowers or a pet, to demonstrate death is permanent, not only for today but every day from now.
- Typical ‘magical thinking’ at this age can create misconceptions. Though adults may see it as harsh, direct and clear words: dying, death, dead, are helpful to the magical thinking a child may have.

Magical thinking is a child’s belief that what they wish or expect can affect what happens. For example, if a child wants something to happen, and it does, the child believes they caused it to happen.
- Incorporate your family’s belief of afterlife. It helps a child know where their person or the person’s spirit, aura, soul, and life force is to maintain a connection.
- Repetition of questions is normal. At this age, they have no experience to relate the death to. It is a new concept and needs repetition for the child to learn what death means.
- Have your child help choose a support person, someone they know well and are very comfortable with, as a go-to when a parent or caregiver isn’t available.
- Acknowledge grief is felt in our heart and body (tummy/body aches, sleep/eating issues, lethargy/hyperactivity, and attention issues). Activities such as yoga, controlled breathing (ie. blowing bubbles), bike riding, running, kicking a ball, going outside, and punching a pillow can help.
- Play is a child’s first language. Play with your child during the first and the many subsequent conversations. They may not look like they are listening, but they absorb every word and sense the seriousness of the talk. They are learning about death. Watch how death is incorporated into their play. This is normal processing and learning.
- A child grieves in different ways at different times. A child may adapt to the death quickly. As the child grows, grief will likely return at developmental changes, significant family/social/school events, and holidays. Developmental growth broadens the understanding of death and impact on the child’s life.



## Considerations for Children (7 to 12 years)

- Review the child's understanding of the person's decline in health, leading to their death. Use clear language. The finality of death is established during this stage; concrete direct language is essential.
- Answer questions. There may be questions on the details of the death; provide age-appropriate information.
- Establish a support person as a go-to when a parent or caregiver isn't available.
- Ask the child how they want to participate: pick out flowers, help a sibling, walk the dog, create a photo collage, draw a picture to be placed in the casket, et cetera.
- Be truthful to maintain trust with the child. 'I don't know' is better than incorrect information.
- Talk about self-care for when emotions get big; be an example of using coping techniques.



## Considerations for Teenagers (13+ years)

- Provide a familiar, distraction-free environment for the conversation about the death.
- Help teens find support. Teens will likely seek support from their peers, especially those who have experienced a death. Encourage their participation in peer support groups, if desired.
- Check in with them frequently. Parental support is very important. Briefly share your emotional status or coping method.
- Avoid having them take on too much family responsibility. Some teens may assume responsibility for the family beyond their abilities. Provide tasks for them to choose from to include the teen without overtaxing them.
- Answer questions. Teens may seek additional details and explanations; they are learning.
- Encourage Self-Care. Invite teens to participate in your self-care or provide a list for them to choose from (yoga, bike ride, run, sports).





## Self-Care is Key

Chances are if you have to deliver bad news, it is something upsetting to you, as well. Stop and check-in with yourself. One of the best ways to help your child is to care for yourself.

- Take a moment after your conversation with your child to breathe and reflect.
- Identify supports you can go to talk about your own grief to avoid leaning on your child(ren) too much.
- If your feelings get too intense, rely on your support to help care for your children and ensure their needs are met.
- Sharing your own feelings and memories are just a few ways to help your child.

**\*Inclusive Gender Statement:** In the context of this document, the use of the term “child(ren)” encompasses both boys and girls, as well as any other gender identity or gender expression that falls within the spectrum of childhood. This language choice is intended to promote inclusion and respect for the diversity of gender identities and non-binary genders.

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