

Talking to Kids About Death and Grief: 10 Comprehensive Tips

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If you came here looking for a script for talking to your child about death and grief, I'm sorry, we can't give you one. Your child is an individual and your situation is unique, so what you say and do will depend on a number of different factors. But here's some good news:

1. As a caring and loving parent, you likely already have the qualities necessary to navigate this situation
2. Qualities like reliability, consistency, warmth, and openness are far more beneficial to the child's well-being than having the perfect words and right answers.
3. We can't tell you exactly what to say, but we *can* offer you tips on talking to kids about death and grief.

As a general rule of thumb, what you discuss with the child will depend on the following three things:

How old they are

The child's age will have a large influence on how you communicate with the child. As children learn, grow, and mature, their capacity to understand will change and evolve. For instance, when speaking with small children you will want to stick with straightforward and simple answers, while when speaking with teens you may explore more complex and abstract concepts.

How close they were to the person who died

We'll define closeness in two ways (1) when the child was very close to the deceased such as with a parent, grandparent, or sibling or (2) when the memory of the deceased is a constant presence, even though the child may not have had a close relationship with the person. Examples of this second scenario include any close family member, like a grandparent, sibling, or parent, who died before the child was able to build a relationship with them.

If the person who died was *not* a close family member, friend or community member, you may find that having one or two conversations is all that is necessary. If the person who died *was* a close family member or friend or community member, then you should conceptualize your first conversation as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue, rather than as a single conversation.

Although initial conversations about the death may not be detailed, expect that as the child processes the loss, and as their capacity to question and understand matures, they may want to know more about their loved one, want to know more about the circumstances of the death and want to talk about their loved one as a way of maintaining their ongoing bond.

How curious they are

If the child has questions, it's a sign that they are curious, that they don't understand, or that they are seeking reassurance. Remember, grief is an ongoing process and that your child may

continue to process the death long after your conversation with them has ended. Allow the child to ask questions within the context of your conversation(s) and make sure they know it's okay to ask questions later on if they come up. Don't be surprised if children ask the same questions over and over, they may want to clarify their understanding or they may want reassurance that the story hasn't changed. If you think it may be helpful, you and the child can also discuss other adults they feel comfortable going to with questions (such as an aunt or uncle, adult sibling, faith leader, etc.)

Some specific tips for talking to kids about death and grief:

Tip #1: Assess Understanding

Assess your child's understanding of the topic at hand; either what specifically happened to their loved one and/or their understanding of concepts like death. Many children have no prior experience with death and they may have no idea, or odd ideas, about what happens when a person dies.

When asking a 4-year-old what happens when you die, they may seem to know that death has something to do with the body, but beyond that, their conception be a mix of imagination and information picked up here-and-there.

A seven-year-old has a more complex understanding of death. They may have a vague idea of what happens, understanding death's permanence, knowing that people feel tough emotions after someone dies, and having real-life reference points.

It's good to assess the child's understanding of what you plan to discuss with them because this will help you decide how to approach the subject. Now we're not saying you should give your child the third-degree, rather that it can be helpful to begin your conversation by asking them about the thoughts and ideas already swirling around in their heads.

Such a conversation can take many forms. Some examples include:

- If your family has recently experienced the death of someone very important, you may start with a specific question like – *“Do you know why mommy is sad today?”*
- If you think the child already has some idea of what has happened (because children are far more tuned in than you think) you might ask something like, *“What do you know about what's been going on?”* or *“What do you think happened?”*
- If you're discussing the loss of someone they didn't know, you might show them a photograph and say something like, *“Do you know who this is?”* or *“This is your brother, he died before you were born. Do you know what it means when someone dies?”*

Tip #2: Be honest and straightforward

Parents want to protect their children from pain and harm, this goes without saying.

But sometimes this instinct can lead caring adults astray. Being honest with children about something as frightening and upsetting as death may feel callous and damaging, but it's actually really important to be straightforward and truthful.

Put yourself in their shoes. If you are curious, worried, or scared about something unknown, are you able to take your mind off of it? How do you feel when you can tell someone is withholding something from you, being evasive, or outright refusing to answer your questions? Do you stop

wondering? I expect your answer to these questions is – “No!” You’d either worry, wonder, ruminate, or draw your own (potentially incorrect) conclusions. Don’t assume that when your child is put in this same position they won’t do the same.

As an adult caregiver, children look to you to clarify their understanding of what’s happened. Confusion and lack of information will only leave the child guessing. Although the simple truth may be heartbreaking, the fantasy of the unknown can be far more frightening to a child.

What you say will depend on your situation, but generally speaking try to match the child’s developmental level. Don’t feel as though you have to tell them everything all at once and don’t give them more information than they can handle; hopefully, they will feel comfortable asking you questions now and in the future. With small children, phrases like the following may be appropriate.

“He is dead and will not be alive again.”

“Her body stopped working”

“He isn’t suffering and he can no longer feel anything”

“She took too much to a drug,” in the instance of overdose.

“Suicide is when someone makes their body stop working,” in the instance of suicide.

After explaining new concepts or providing them new information, assess their understanding of what you’ve said to them and invite questions.

Tip # 3: Don’t use euphemism!

People commonly use euphemism to replace words or phrases that make them uncomfortable. Many adults aren’t comfortable talking about death, even amongst other adults. This is likely why there are approximately 200 euphemism related to concepts around death and dying. But up until a certain age, kids are very concrete in their thinking. Thanks to their literal nature, euphemisms like the following only cause more confusion:

“She’s in a better place” = She went somewhere great

“She’s left us” = She left/abandoned us and she may or may not return

“She’s sleeping” = She’s asleep and she will wake up.

“She went to sleep forever” = There’s a chance that I could go to sleep and never wake up

“She passed away” = Not sure what that means

“She is resting in peace” = She’s sleeping somewhere peacefully

I know you might feel tempted to use euphemism when explaining death to children, but don’t.

Tip #4: Validate their emotions

Remember that a wide range of emotions is normal in grief, so don’t be surprised if the child seems to show little emotion or if they show an emotion like anger, worry, or fear. Normalize and validate their emotions, whatever they may be.

Tip #5: It's okay to share your own emotions

Generally speaking, being open about your own grief will provide your child with reassurances that he or she is not alone and that it is acceptable to feel all types of emotions in response to loss. Be willing to acknowledge your painful feelings and be open to discussing the hard parts. By maintaining an authentic, warm, and supportive dialogue, you are setting the stage to be able to discuss grief as it changes and shifts in the days, weeks, and years to come.

That said, as hard as initial conversations may be with your child, try to stay calm and in control. If you're worried about keeping collected, you may want to set aside some time before or after the conversation to process your own emotions. You may also want to consider having another trusted adult with you, either for moral support or to help you guide the conversation.

Tip #6: Don't judge

You don't need us to tell you this, but kids say the darnedest things. Sometimes the things they say will surprise you because their comments are astute and observant, cut right to the quick, or the words they choose are kind of silly. If a child says something that surprises you in the context of a conversation about death, try not to make them feel embarrassed, wrong, or ashamed.

Some examples of things that may take adults by surprise when speaking to a child about death include:

- If the child has specific curiosities about the physical aspects of death
- If the child seems like they don't care
- If the child's response seems selfish or self-centered
- If the child says something matter-of-fact or direct
- If the child has existential questions or observations about the meaning of life and death
- If the child makes angry, blaming statements

Remember, there's a wide range of normal responses and children will grieve little-by-little over time. Do your best to respond to their questions and comments in a calm, validating, and non-judgmental way.

Tip #7: Reassure, reassure, reassure

The death of a loved one is scary. Intense emotions are scary. Change is scary. As your child attempts to cope with everything that has happened, and as they attempt to make meaning of the death, they will likely benefit from a lot of reassurance. Hopefully, your child will make their worries known, but you may feel it's appropriate to reassure them about some of the following:

The death was not their fault: Grief has a funny way of making people, child and adult alike, feel guilty for all sorts of things. Some reasons why a child might feel responsible for their loved one's death include:

- **Magical thinking.** This is when a child believes that their negative thoughts and wishes somehow contributed to their loved one's death.

- If the person died from suicide, the child might have thoughts that if the person had loved them more they wouldn't have chosen to die, or if they had been a better child the person might have been happier.
- If the child was in some way involved in the event that led to the death, they may feel responsible for the circumstances that led to the death or feel that they failed to respond in a way that prevented the death.

Make sure the child knows that the death was not their fault and that the death was not something they could have prevented.

The death was not their loved one's choice: Reassure the child that the death was not a deliberate choice and the person did not want to leave or abandon the child. In certain circumstances, like suicide, it may be helpful to discuss mental illness or to explain that "*their brain wasn't working properly*" and that this is why they killed themselves, not because they didn't love their family or because they didn't care about them.

They are safe and their family is safe: Make sure the child knows that they are safe and that they will not die. Make sure they also know that their family is safe and that their family members will not die anytime soon. I know we can't be sure of this, but reassure the child anyways (unless you have a compelling reason to believe this isn't true).

Sicknesses like the flu or a cold do not lead to death: If your loved one died of an illness like cancer, make sure the child knows that the type of illness their loved one had is different than the types of sicknesses they experience like the flu or the common cold.

They will be taken care of: Make sure the child knows that they will always be taken care of, no matter what happens. It may be helpful to brainstorm all the caring adults in their life who they can count on.

You will be honest with them and keep them informed: Death leads to change, it's often unavoidable. Reassure your child that you will get through things as a family, that you will make decisions as a family whenever possible, and that you will talk to them about changes before they happen.

Tip #8: Prepare them for customary rituals like funerals and memorial services

Talk to your child about funeral/memorial services before they attend them. There are three important things to cover in this conversation:

1. Include them in the planning to the extent possible. Ask them if there are things they would like to incorporate into the event or if there are special ways that they would like to honor their loved one.
2. Talk to them about what to expect before, during, and after the services, burial, etc. This may include discussions about things like the person's body, burial, cremation, what types of emotions they may witness, what types of emotions they expect to feel, etc.
3. Discuss their concerns and worries. Are there any parts of these rituals that worry them? Brainstorm ways for them to cope in the moment. For example, a small child might like to bring a favorite stuffed animal to hold or might want to choose a trusted

adult to be their buddy for the day. Older kids might want help identifying a room or place where they can go to take a break if necessary.

Tip # 9: If you think it's necessary, help them to decide what they will say and/or share if people ask them about their loved one's death.

Help them to find their own language and way of responding to the sympathies and/or questions of others. Reassure them that it's okay to keep things private if they like

Tip # 10: Help them identify other support people who they feel comfortable talking with

You viewed this article on the Caregivers Nova Scotia website www.CaregiversNS.org. For more information, contact us toll-free at 1.877.488.7390.