

How to talk to children about death

Children as young as two or three years of age can sense the impact of a death in the family, often signaled by changes in household routines or the appearance of lots of people in their home. Naturally they are too young to know the real meaning of death, but they are not too young to feel frightened, curious or insecure about the unusual comings and goings around them. Whilst children may not grieve like adults do, they will react to signs of stress around them. A major task for adults is to help children to feel safe amidst all this.

Parents generally underestimate the need to inform children, and their motivation to protect their children from hurt means they often refrain from giving children helpful explanations about what's happened. The following tips are summarised from my book, **What's Dead Mean?**

- Given the opportunity and a safe environment, many children are keen to talk about issues surrounding death, they can be endlessly curious, and their grief may involve asking many questions - simple, factual answers are the best response rather than a sweeping reassurance that "everything is fine", which may not match what the child is observing. When a child's need for involvement and information is not met, often they rely on their imagination to fill in the gaps.
- Despite what adults may believe, the words "dead" and "die" are familiar to most young children. They have already heard various versions of these words around the home - "dead tired", "dead easy", "scared to death", "drop dead" - the list is endless. They probably won't have associated them with people dying - they know flowers die, a pet may die, and dead insects can be found in the garden. They need to learn that people die too.
- It's important for children to know that dead is NOT like sleeping. It is about life ending - this means that the normal things your body does when you're alive can't be done anymore. It's important to know that dead people don't feel anything anymore - they often worry about this when it comes to being buried or cremated.
- Young children don't understand that death is permanent. So they often ask when the person is coming back or if they can go to see them. These questions are expected for this age group. The best way to approach such questions is simply to repeat the information: "No, we can't see Daddy because he is dead, but we can still look at his photos and see him that way."
- Children need to share in family grief - if adults can name their feelings, "I'm sad because Daddy has died", it can be helpful to children who are trying to understand their own emotions and to know that it's alright to cry when you're sad. We need to teach children that emotions are a normal part of loss, for boys and girls, for big kids and little kids.
- The opportunity to participate in farewells is an important learning and healing experience - children sometimes report anger, disappointment and frustration at not being included in these events. But if they are going to attend a funeral or a viewing, we need to prepare them for what they'll see, who will be there and that some people will cry because they are sad.
- Be aware that children's grief is often not expressed in words, but through their actions instead. You can expect angry outbursts, regressive behavior like thumb-sucking, bed wetting, clinginess, fear of you being out of their sight or wanting your constant attention. They may develop a fear of the dark or sleeping problems. Children might also 'act out' what has happened - play dead games and re-enact hospital or ambulance or funeral scenes through their play. Don't worry, this is their way of taking in information and trying to absorb it and make sense of it.

Extract from:
"What's Dead Mean?"
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