



Explaining to young children that someone has died

Talking to a young child about death and dying is incredibly difficult and can feel just too hard to do. This is compounded by an adult's natural instinct to protect children from the tough things in life. In order to make some sense of what has happened children need information and explanations. These need to be honest, simple, and in language that the children understand.

Children can deal with the truth, no matter how difficult or traumatic, what they find hard are the untruths. When circumstances surrounding the death are particularly distressing it may be tempting to withhold information, but even in those instances the same principles apply. The following are suggestions to help you with what to say, how much to say, when and how to say it. The words suggested are not meant to be a script. They are ideas to give you the confidence to go with what feels right for you and the child or children that you are with.

Every age group has a different capacity to understand death and experience grief:

Early Elementary School: Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. In case of war images, young children may not be able to differentiate between what they see on television, and what might happen in their own neighborhood. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5-6—if jet planes don't fly, then people don't die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.

Middle School: Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.

High School: Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even terrorist attacks. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

When talking to a child of any age, the following principles apply regardless of the circumstances:

- Use simple words appropriate for the child's age and understanding. It is important to use the real words such as "dead". Euphemisms including lost or gone to sleep may appear kinder but for a child can cause complication and confusion.
- Only give as much information as a child wants. This is usually indicated by them asking a question – if they have asked the question it usually means that they are ready to hear, or need to hear, the answer.
- Try to answer only the question asked and avoid giving extra detail. There is a fine line between being honest and overloading a child with information they do not want.

- If faced with a question that you find particularly difficult, or one that you are not sure how to answer, it can be helpful to ask the child what they think. This will give you an indication of how much the child already knows and understands.

How to tell a young child that someone has died:

- Alert the child to the fact that you have something sad to say “I have some very sad news to tell you...”
- Often initially all you need to say is that the person has died, more questions will follow when the child is ready for further explanation and more information.
- Reassure the child that it is OK to ask questions about anything at all and you will do your best to answer them honestly.

Helping young children cope

- **Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:** Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- **Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings:** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- **Grieving is a process, not an event:** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume “normal” activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.
- **Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event:** Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- **Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death:** Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- **Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death:** Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- **Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:** We all grieve in different ways and there is no one “correct” way for people to move through the grieving process.
- **Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:** Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.
- **Children will need long-lasting support:** The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.
- **Keep in mind that grief work is hard:** It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- **Be aware of your own need to grieve:** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves.

Children and teens with grieving friends and classmates

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this “secondary” loss..

- **Children need reassurance from caregivers and teachers that their own families are safe.** Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings, particularly for students who have family in the military or other risk related professions. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.

- **Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages.** Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say and what to expect.
- **Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior.** It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- **Explain to children that their “regular” friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates.** Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- **Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help.** Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.
- **Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult.** This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.
- **Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend's loss of a loved one.** These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

Sources:

1. Adams, Jill, Child Bereavement UK Information Sheet, September 2010
2. National Association of School Psychologists, Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief Tips for Teachers and Parents, 2003