



Bereavement how to talk about it with children

When a loved or important person has died, tell your child as soon as possible. It's a good idea to tell your child yourself if you can. This means you'll be able to support them and answer their questions directly.

If you have more than one child in your family, you might talk with the children together or separately. If you tell children together, you can make sure that the information is consistent and that both children hear it at the same time. But if you have children of different ages or temperaments, it might be easier to tell them separately.

It can also help to have the support of another adult when you talk with your children about death. You could ask your partner, if you have one, or a friend or family member who's close to the children to be with you when you talk to them.

What to say when talking about death with children

Your child needs your help to understand death. So it's best to explain what has happened as simply and truthfully as you can. For example, 'I have some sad news. Your Aunty Sal died this morning'.

Using the words 'death' and 'died' can avoid problems. If you say that someone has 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep', your child might be confused or frightened. For example, a child who is told that 'Grandpa has gone to sleep forever' might get scared of sleeping because they're afraid they'll never wake up.

Younger children might not know what death means, so you might need to describe it and make sure they understand that death doesn't go away. For example, 'Dying means that Aunty Sal's body has stopped working. She can't breathe, move or cuddle you anymore'.

If you feel very uncomfortable talking about death, you might need to practise with another adult first. You could go through what you'll say and how you'll answer your child's questions. Or you might like to write down a few notes as reminders.

It can also help to think about what you'll say if you don't know the answer to your child's questions. It's OK to say something like, 'I don't know but I'll try to find out'.

How to answer children's questions about death

When someone dies, your child will probably have questions. If you think ahead about answering these questions, you'll be ready when your child asks. This can make things easier for both of you.

Here are questions that children often ask. Young children might ask the same questions many times as they try to make sense of death.

Why did they die?

Your child is trying to make sense of death. They might want to know what caused the death, so try to answer the question at your child's level. For example, 'Grandpa's heart was very old and wasn't working properly. The doctors tried to fix it, but it had a very bad sickness that they couldn't fix'.

Will you die? Will I die?

Your child might start to realise that the people they love could die. It's a good idea to let your child know that most people die only when they're very old or very sick.

If a young person has died, let your child know that this doesn't happen very often. You could also point out all the other people your child knows of the same age who are alive and well.

What happens when you die?

How you answer this question depends on your family's personal or spiritual beliefs. You could talk with your children about these beliefs.

Many people find comfort in giving their children something to focus on when thinking about the person who has died. For example, 'When we see a star in the sky, we can think about Nanna'.

Whatever you tell your child, it's helpful if it comforts you too. This way your child can see that you find it reassuring yourself.

Unexpected questions

Your child might ask questions that seem a bit strange, like 'Does Grandpa feel cold when he's dead?' or 'Can Grandma see me now?' Try to answer these questions because they help your child to understand what death is.

How to handle your own feelings about death

It's OK for your child to see that you're sad, or to see you cry, when someone important to you dies. But it's also a good idea to explain your feelings to your child. For example, 'I'm crying because Grandpa died, and I feel very sad that I'll never see him again'.

It might help you to talk to a trusted friend or family member about your feelings. If you'd prefer to do this without your child around, another friend or family member might be able to look after your child during this time.

If your feelings are making it hard for you to do everyday things, even after some time has passed, you might need to get some support.