

Talking to Your Child about Death

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Death is a part of life. In your day-to-day experiences with your child, you will have many times when fate presents you with opportunities to talk about the circle of life. Whether that's driving past a cemetery, or seeing a dead animal on the side of the road, or the death of an acquaintance, overhearing news about tragedies, the loss of a pet, or the death of a character in a book or movie. Each of these teachable moments offers an opening for a brief conversation about death. We can talk about the dying process as matter-of-factly as we talk about new buds coming out on trees, or talk about grief just as we talk about the happiness we feel about a recent event.

Having open and honest conversations throughout their lives helps to prepare us and them for when we have to have a much harder conversation about the death of someone they cared deeply for.

It helps to have some knowledge of **developmental stages** in children's understanding of death:

- Toddlers (age 2 – 3). Do not understand death, though they may notice the absence of someone who had been present in their life. May notice that others are feeling sad.
- Preschool age (3 - 5). Even if you explain what death is, they may not be able to grasp it. For example, they may believe death is temporary and reversible.
- Early elementary age (5 - 9): Children learn that all living things someday die, and that death is final. They aren't clear on what causes death or that they themselves will someday die.
- Tweens (age 9 - 12): They understand what death is - that organisms no longer function in the way they did when they were alive – and that death is final and they will die someday.
- Teenagers: Begin to wonder about the meaning of life and form beliefs about what happens after death. Some begin taking risks, as if to test their own immortality.

When and How to Talk About Death

Be thoughtful about whether *you* bring it up. There's typically no reason for you to push the topic, unless you believe a death will come soon to someone they care about. In this case, talking about it allows them to build special memories, and say their goodbyes.

If *they* bring it up, don't change the subject. Let them know it's OK to talk about it. If they've asked a question, clarify exactly what they're asking so you don't end up telling them more than they're ready for. You can also turn the question around, and ask them what they already know. This lets you set a baseline for what you need to talk about. It also allows you to correct misconceptions.

Reassure. Often when someone asks a question, there is an underlying concern behind the question. If a child asks you "can parents die?", they may really be asking "will you die? Who will take care of me?" Put it into words for them: "are you worried I won't be here to take care of you?" First, unless you have reason to suspect otherwise, say "I don't expect to die any time soon." Then reassure that even if that were to happen, they would be OK: "But if I did die, here's who would take care of you."

Think about key points to make about what death is. There are a few key ideas to convey. You don't cover these all at once, but in several minute-long conversations spread throughout their childhood:

- Death is the cessation of life functions. Use simple terms and concrete examples from their life experience. "When an animal dies, it no longer breathes, or eats, or moves or feels hungry."
"Do you remember when your pea plant died, and it stopped growing?"

- Death is caused by physical reasons. Describe in a simple, non-graphic way what caused a death. Explain enough that they understand... for example, don't just say "she died because she was sick." Say something like "she was really sick, with a disease called _____. It's not something I would expect you or me to get..."
 - Note: Children are inherently self-centered - When someone dies, they may wonder if it was because of something the child did. Reassure them the death is *not their fault*.
- Death is permanent.
 - Avoid confusing children by saying the person "went to sleep" or "went away" because they may either worry that when you sleep or you go away to the store, you'll never come back. Also, saying someone is "watching over you" could be confusing.
- Everything that is alive will someday die. It is more likely to happen when something is old – near the end of its natural life span – but not always.

You may worry that you don't know what to say about things like what death feels like, or what happens after you die. It's OK to say to your child "No one knows for sure. I believe _____."

Share your own beliefs. Share your own values; talk about beliefs that are important to your family.

Talk about how we might feel about death. Don't be shy about talking about grief. It is one of many emotions that we humans experience. (Emotional literacy is a key life skill for children to gain.) But also talk about the wide range of reactions that people may have. Some may be sad. Some may be angry. Some may not seem to react at all. And some may react on a different schedule. It's all OK.

If you are experiencing grief, explain that you are sad (or angry) about the loss, and missing the person. Reassure your child that it is not their fault you are sad. (If you're experiencing extreme, raw grief, that could be frightening for your child – ask another adult to support you and your child.)

Know when to move on. Sometimes your child may ask more questions in the moment. Sometimes not. If your child has initiated a discussion, then seems ready to move on before you think "we're done", follow the child's lead and move on. Prolonging the conversation will only cause discomfort.

When a child is grieving.

Don't avoid talking about the person (or animal) who has died. Even though they're no longer here, you can still remember them. Children may want to do a ceremony or create a shrine. You could establish new traditions based on a favorite thing they did with the loved one who has passed away.

Your child may need help remembering the person won't come back. They may ask again and again when they will return. They are not doing this to upset anyone. They're just wrapping their minds around the permanency of death.

Your child may "play" death. They're trying to understand. It's fine to use puppets or stuffed animals to tell the story or play things out. It may help your child to draw about their feelings and memories.

Many children will regress or have behavioral challenges after a death of a loved one. Be patient and understanding with them, but don't overly coddle them and toss all the normal rules out the window. Normal family rules should still apply. The sooner you get back to normal routines, the better. This helps you all move forward to the "new normal" of what your life will look like in the future.

Using Media to Start the Conversation

There are several excellent books and some shows that are explicitly designed to help children understand death and manage grief. There are also many excellent books and movies that include a death that you can use to help you start a conversation. Learn more on www.GoodDaysWithKids.com.