

Information for patients, carers
and visitors

Talking to children about death and dying



Earl Mountbatten Hospice

Why should we talk to children about death and dying?

It is natural to want to protect children from hurt and upset but we **cannot** protect children from death by **not** talking about it. The death of a close relative will have an impact on a child.

Children are egocentric and use magical thinking. This means that children believe that their own thoughts, wishes, feelings and actions influence the external world. For example a child may believe that it is raining because they are sad or if they wish for something it will happen in the real world. Because of this children often feel responsible for what happens in their lives. As children develop they begin to learn more about logic and cause and effect but still may occasionally go back to magical thinking.

If we do not talk to children about death and dying they may develop misunderstandings and may believe they are to blame for what is happening. Not talking to children may also give them the message that what is happening is too awful to cope with. Children rely on the adults around them to help them make sense of the world and to bring order and security to their lives. The pain of the death of a loved one is likely to be worse if children are not prepared and they may develop feelings of guilt, anger, confusion, and fear.

Knowing how to support children when someone is dying can help them cope after the death. The following information is a guide to help adults talk to children about death and dying.

At what age should we talk to children about death?

Children are never too young to talk about death and dying.

From a young age you can use the natural environment to introduce children to the concept of death. For example by talking through the life cycle of a flower as you see a flower withering, or a tree as leaves fall to the ground, or a dead insect found on the ground.

Although by age eight most children will understand that death is permanent and happens to everyone we can still help children talk about death and help reduce any fears or misunderstandings they may have.

Life events such as the death of a pet can provide a good opportunity to talk about death.

How to tell a child a relative is dying

Plan

Plan what to say. Rehearsing what you want to say may help you feel clearer about the information you wish to get across to your child it may also help you manage the emotions you may experience when giving this information.

Timing

Find a suitable time and place to have this conversation. Both you and your child may benefit from a time when it is quiet and relaxed without other distractions. However, do not put off talking to your child because the time does not seem right. There may never be a right time to have this conversation.

Emotions

Do not worry if you do become upset when talking to your child. Showing or telling your child you feel sad about the situation helps them to know that their own grief is acceptable.

Information

Check what your child already knows about their relative's illness before giving new information.

Simple information given in small amounts is more likely to be understood. Going back and checking what has been understood or repeating the information again may be helpful.

Language

Be direct and clear in your language. Do not use phrases such as passing / passed away, going to lose / have lost, or going to / gone to sleep. These phrases can leave a child thinking that a person may come back again or that sleeping is frightening because you might not wake up.

It is OK to use the words **death, dying** and **dead**. You might want to use the following definitions to help explain what is meant by these words:

Death is the permanent end of the life of a person or animal.

A **dying** person or animal is very ill and likely to die soon.

A person, animal or plant that is **dead** is no longer living. When someone is dead, they will not be hungry or lonely and they will not feel cold or pain.

Questions

Ask if they have any questions. Don't worry if you think you have answered questions badly. It is more important that you are showing you are listening and willing to have a conversation.

Reassurance

Reassure your child the illness and the situation is nothing to do with them and that it is not their fault.

Your child may need reassurance that other people they know are not dying as well and may ask when you or other people are going to die. It can be helpful for children to know that most people die when they are much older and live for a long time before they die. You can reassure your child that you / other important people in their lives should be around for a long time to take care of them.

Include

Involving children in their relative's care can make them feel they are helping and make them feel what is happening is less frightening. Do not force your child to do something but ask if they would like to help with a task, for example helping to fetch a cushion or make a drink or help with shopping.

Routine

You may need to change things a little if your child needs emotional support, but trying to keep some routine can help children feel safe and secure.

School

Talk to your child's school. School can be an important way to maintain some routine. Teachers will also be able to offer support to your child, understand why they may be behaving differently and help with talking to friends about what is going on.

Connectedness

Continue to talk about the person who is unwell. Having a meaningful object or photograph to keep with them may help your child feel connected to their loved one, reduce their anxiety when they are away from their loved one and can help maintain their memories later on.

Managing the difficult questions

Q: "Are you going to die?"

Inform the child that most people die when they are much older. Reassure them that you should be around for a long time to take care of them.

Q: "Am I going to die?"

Children need to know that everyone dies eventually but you can reassure them that they are young and most people do not die until they are much older.

Q: “Why do people die?”

Explain that people die when their bodies stop working and this is usually when they are much older. If people are ill usually doctors can give them medicine to make them better but sometimes when someone has a serious illness or has been in a very serious accident there are no medicines that can help.

Q: “What happens when you are dead?”

You can help a child to understand that being dead means your body doesn't work anymore. So when somebody is dead they can't move or eat or breathe or do anything. They cannot feel any pain and they will not wake up.

Q: “Do people come back again after they have died?”

Help children to know that when you are dead you cannot come back again and you cannot do anything to make them come back.

Q: “Is it my fault?”

It is essential to reassure a child that this is not their fault. That they have not done or said anything to make this happen and are not to blame.

How do children react to the news that a relative is dying or has died?

Children's reactions will depend on their age and developmental stage and each child's reaction will be individual.

Children react in many ways. They may be sad and upset, angry or misbehave. They may even act as if they are fine and everything is normal.

It can sometimes appear that children are coping better than adults but this is not necessarily the case, their reactions may just be different. They may ask practical questions rather than talk about their feelings. For example “what does a dead body look like?”

Children's questions may also seem unrelated or even inappropriate to the news you are giving them or the situation. For example "Are we still going to the cinema later?" These sorts of questions do not mean that a child does not care or is not experiencing any emotions related to the news, it may just mean that they do not have the emotional language to express their feelings or because children tend to live in the moment and might not be looking ahead to what this news actually means for their future.

Supporting a child after their loved one has died

Children will go through a process of grief. It can sometimes appear that a child grieves over a shorter period of time to an adult, but children tend to grieve in cycles and their grief may be revisited at times of stress or at certain milestones, for example changing school, leaving school, starting a job, getting married, and having children of their own, as well as at special anniversary dates throughout the year.

Continue to allow your child to ask questions and talk about their feelings.

Continue to maintain routines where possible.

Continue to involve and seek support from the school.

Continue to provide reassurance that other important people around them are well and OK.

Continue to talk about the person who has died.

Maintaining Memories

It is important to continue to talk about the person that has died and help your child remember. There are many ways to help your child remember their loved one, for example;

- Share happy stories of the person who has died.
- Make a memory box of photographs and/or special items that remind them of their loved one.

- Make a scrap book or journal about their loved one's life.
- Look through photographs and watch videos together of the person who has died.
- Make a pillowcase from clothes of the person who has died or have a pillowcase printed with a special photograph. This may help your child feel close to the person that died and more secure at night.

Living

Children should be allowed to continue with their lives when they are ready and they need to know this is OK so that they do not feel guilty about this.

Managing the difficult questions

Q: "What happens after death?"

People have different thoughts and beliefs about death. You can explain this to a child and say for example that some people believe nothing happens when you are dead and some people think you go to a special place.

Q: "What is a soul or spirit and where does it go?"

You can explain that some people believe that a spirit or soul is part of a person that is inside their body and that when a person is dead their spirit goes to a special place. It is important to make sure the child knows that this still means they cannot see the person that has died again and cannot go to the special place to be with the person.

Q: "What happens to your body after you have died?"

You may need to remind a child that when someone has died that their body no longer works and that they don't need it and that is why their body is either buried or turned into ashes (cremated). You may also need to remind them that because they are dead and their body no longer works they do not feel anything / will not be in pain.

Children and Funerals

A funeral is an opportunity to say goodbye to the person that has died and can be an important part of the grieving process. It is a family occasion and children should be given the opportunity to be involved in that occasion if they wish.

Explaining and preparing for a funeral

Children need to know what a funeral is and what to expect at the funeral to help them decide if they wish to attend. Explain why we have a funeral, for example that it is a special occasion for people to get together and remember and say goodbye to the person that died.

Explain what will happen at the funeral, for example that there will be music and special readings, stories or poems about the person who died. Explain who will be there and that people may be upset and cry. Explain in simple language what will happen to their loved one's body.

Support at the funeral

Identify a close adult that can look after the child if they become upset and support them in leaving the funeral if they need to.

Involvement in the funeral

Help your child to feel involved. They may want to choose some flowers or write a special card or poem, or help choose some music for the funeral. Older children may wish to read or say something themselves.

What if a child does not attend a funeral?

A child needs to know it is OK if after being informed about a funeral they decide not to attend.

Sometimes adults decide that they just cannot manage to have the child at the funeral. If this is the case you should explain to your child that you have decided they should not come and give a reason for this: for example that you feel it would be too upsetting or painful.

If a child does not attend the funeral

- Plan how they will spend the day instead and who they will be with for support. They may spend the day with another family member or friend or may chose to go to school as usual.
- Have an alternative ceremony. Rituals are important and you could do something else in remembrance and to say goodbye, for example plant a tree or let off balloons.

Your own grief

Remember to look after yourself too and seek support if you need it.

For further information and support please contact us:

KissyPuppy Children and Families Bereavement Service
Psychological Services
Earl Mountbatten Hospice
Halberry Lane
Newport
Isle of Wight
PO30 2ER

01983 533776

You can also access support and information from a number of other organisations, such as:

Childhood Bereavement Network: information service for people looking for help for bereaved children, anywhere in UK; 0115 911 8070, email cbp@ncb.org.uk

Winston's Wish Family Line: Telephone help and advice; 0845 203045, email info@winstonswish.org.uk



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