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# Grief Talk: Talking to Children About Death and Dying



## Introduction

If you are raising or caring for a child or teen who needs to be informed of a death, you may wonder how to share this news with them. It is perfectly natural to feel nervous or even fearful of talking with a child about this emotional topic. This resource was created to help you prepare for these conversations.

## Setting the Stage

Before initiating a conversation with the child, there are some general principles to consider. These include: who will deliver the news, as well as when, where, and how the conversation takes place.

The person who shares the news should ideally be the person to whom the child feels the closest. This is often the caregiver, but not always. If the parent is the person who has died, a grandparent, aunt/uncle, or other relative may be called upon to talk with the child. If it is possible and feels right, another supportive adult who is well known to the child may also be invited to be present. This person can be a resource and support for both the adult sharing the news and the child. If there are multiple children, consider telling them together so they each receive the same story and details.

If you are the person who will be talking with the child, check in with yourself first- do you have support? Do you have the information you need to share this news/ start the conversation? **You are not expected to have all of the answers, but having enough information to begin the conversation is important.** You may spend some time imagining how the conversation might go, or even choose to practice with a friend or family member before talking with the child.

**Where and when the news is shared matters.** A calm, safe space where you will not be interrupted is ideal. This may be the child's home or another familiar place where they feel safe. You may consider having some comfort items present and available to the child- perhaps a pet, stuffed animal, or special blanket.

**The timing of when to approach this conversation is important to consider.** Ideally, it is soon enough after the death to assure that they hear the news from you first, and not from a stranger or from social media. This ensures accurate information is shared and allows for time to support the child.

You will want to be as prepared as you can to answer questions and **provide space for the child to share and process their feelings.** Depending on the child's age and developmental level, this may or may not happen right away. Be aware that the child may have additional questions or have a need to lead the conversation.

You may think it is best to protect the child from the truth, particularly with stigmatized (suicide, homicide, or death from substance abuse). However, children often know more than we realize.

Sharing information in small bits at a time can be very helpful. You do not need to share all of the details at once, as that can be upsetting or overwhelming, but what you do share should be true.

When you are with a child, speak with a calm, compassionate tone. Start simply and plan to layer on additional information over time. Provide the opportunity for the child to repeat their understanding of what they heard you say, then restate or clarify if needed. The most important thing you can do for the child is to be present, kind, and compassionate.

## Expectations Following the Conversation

Sharing the news of the person's death is only the beginning of the conversation. As indicated above, the child may not be ready or able to ask questions or respond right away to the news of the death. Children respond to death very differently than adults.

Some children, especially younger children, may not respond as we might expect. They may not cry or even seem to understand what you have shared. Children often need to go away and be by themselves or play. A child choosing to play does not indicate that they did not understand or care about the death. In fact, play can be a powerful way for children to process the news.

**Provide opportunities for small conversations over time.** Invite the child to talk with you anytime and encourage their questions. If there are multiple children of different ages and different needs, they may each respond differently. Provide opportunities for each child to follow up one on one. This will allow them each some time to talk, ask questions, and begin to process the news.

The initial conversation about the death is the start of an ongoing conversation. You should be prepared to revisit the topic over time as the child grows and develops. Plan to check in with the child regularly to support them in the future.

If you are looking for information on how to talk to a child about funerals and end of life rituals, view our [Children and End of Life Memorials and Rituals Toolkit](#).

## Young Children (Birth to 5 years old)

### Understanding and Response to Death

- Awareness of death is directly influenced and limited by young children's ability to understand their world.
- Death is viewed as the absence of a parent or caregiver.
- Children may be preoccupied with who will take care of them.
- Children may see themselves as responsible in some way, for a death, and they do not yet recognize time and irreversibility of death.
- Child may want to "die" to be with the person who died.
- Repetition is important with younger children, they may repeatedly be asked the same questions.

### Sources of Support

As caregivers, you are the primary source of security for your children— your continued reassurance about your presence and support is crucial. Extended family members and others may also provide important support, and you can discuss with them how they can be helpful.



## What They May Need from Caregiver(s)

**Be a good listener.** In all your communication, be sure to listen to what your child is experiencing and feeling and show you understand.

**Establish and maintain routines.** Offer reassurance about the predictability of events, family security, and routines.

**Recognize very young children do not understand death as adults do.** When appropriate, gently explain what is happening. You can provide gentle repeating of the facts, knowing time will help the child understand their loss.

**Respond truthfully.** When asked questions, respond truthfully about death according to your own belief system and what the child can understand at the time. To be truthful does not mean you have to share all of the details at one time.

**Model grieving.** When a child sees you being sad or express sadness or other emotions, explain what you are thinking and feeling; sadness is only one way people show they miss someone who has died.

**Allow and encourage children to play and have fun when they want to.**

**Reassure children they are safe and cared for.** Describe and reassure the child your family will experience new routines and they will be safe and cared for. One way to do this is to establish family life routines and special times to be together.

**Talk about the person who died.** Give children opportunities to learn and share about their person. Don't be afraid to talk about the person who died.

**Encourage art activities.** You might ask preschool children to draw a picture showing a memory of their person. Follow up by asking them to tell you about the picture.

**Be assured that regressive behavior is natural.** This happens when a child no longer does things they could before the death, such as potty training. When a child shows regressive behavior, show patience and understanding.

**Include and allow the child to be as involved as they want to be.** Ask the child how they want to participate: pick out the color of the flowers, draw or color a picture to be placed in the casket, choose a photo to share, etc.

## Children (6 years old to 12 years old)

### Understanding and Response to Death

- Awareness of death is influenced and limited by the child's' ability to think about their world.
- Many emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Explain grief is a combination of reactions one can have after someone has died — thinking about the person, feelings of sadness or anger, physical reactions such as tiredness, or upset stomach. These reactions can come or go.
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be the anger children feel because the person has died, but the anger that results when no one listens or talks to them or includes them in activities. Do not assume what prompts feelings, ask them.
- Children recognize death is irreversible.
- Children will be able to appreciate how the loss of a person in their lives will affect them over time, weeks, or months but may not understand the long-term, life-long impact of a death.

### Sources of Support

Although school and outside of their family worlds are increasingly important, caregivers and family are still the school agers' primary source of support. Use outside resources, as you need, to be sure your child is receiving the support they need.

### What They May Need from Caregiver(s)

**Be a good listener.** Encourage their expression of what they are thinking and feeling, their concerns about their alive caregiver's health, financial issues, etc. Provide acceptance and reassurance as needed.

**Respond to the child's need for information about the death,** often the details, allowing them to build a sense of control. They may have a matter-of-fact reaction rather than an emotional one to the circumstances. Give factual answers to questions as best you can, such as how it happened, when, and where. The "whys" of the death may not even be understood by adults, and you can share this with the child.

**Recognize children do not want to be different from other children because of the death.**

Provide the support they need to continue their ongoing activities with their peers. Find grief support groups available, if needed.

**Accept the child's open discussions about the deceased.** Including talking or joining with them, magical thinking (did they cause the death), and concerns about their parent or caregiver's health or financial problems.

**Understand the child can simultaneously hold seemingly contradictory emotions** such as feeling sad about the death yet happy to see family at the memorial service.

**Address how the death has and will affect their lives** . . . "who will help me with my homework?" Children need the reassurance of continuity in their world.

**Help them address separation anxiety** by fully preparing them for any future anticipated separations.

**Establish ongoing family routines**, including positive times you spend together as a family.

**Include and allow the child to be as involved as they want to be.** Ask the child how they want to participate: pick out flowers, help a sibling, walk the dog, create a photo collage, draw a picture to be placed in the casket, etc.



**"Children often know more than we realize."**

## Teens (13 years old to adulthood)

### Understanding and Response to Death

- The teen's awareness and understanding of death are similar to adults. They can incorporate multiple causes and consequences of a death.
- Many complex emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Support them in understanding grief is a combination of reactions one can have after someone has died such as thoughts about the person, feelings like sadness or anger, and physical reactions such as tiredness or an upset stomach. They can also experience more subtle emotions or regret, ambivalence, or relief. These reactions can come or go.
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be anger the teen feels because an important person has died but the anger they feel when no one listens or talks to them or has excluded them from activities. Do not assume what prompts feelings, ask.
- Teens do not inherently see themselves as responsible for a death but are apt to analyze information to determine who or what is responsible.



## Sources of Support

Although peers and other adults become increasingly important, caregivers remain critical sources of information and support.

## What They May Need from Caregiver(s)

**Be available to listen and talk.** Caregivers can engage in detailed narratives of the death and related events.

**Encourage involvement in family activities.** Although they are increasingly involved with peers and outside activities, your family's continuity as a safe place where people care about each other is very important to them.

**Be aware of the intensity of a teen's grief experience.** They may express mood swings. Expect and accept mood swings. Allow hidden feelings unless there is a risk of harm.

**Offer specific opportunities for expressing feelings and remembrance** through writing, art, music, sports, etc.

**Encourage their participation** in peer support groups, if desired.

**Support their unique identity development and independence.** Acknowledging their preference of spending more time with friends balanced with continued involvement in family activities and family bereavement remembrances. Avoid escalation of conflict as they express their independent identity.

**Consistently set appropriate limits.** Adolescents need these limits, although they may protest them.

**Avoid having them take on too much family responsibility** if it is at the expense of their independent development.

**Encourage stress reduction.** Avoid getting them involved in solving stressful situations beyond their ability to control, such as conflicts between adult family members.

**Include and allow the teen to be as involved as they want to be.** Ask the teen how they want to participate: pick out flowers, help a sibling, read a poem, create a photo collage, write a letter to be placed in the casket, etc.



# 10 Key Points to remember when talking to children and teens about death and dying

**Grief is individual.** Children and teens usually do not tell you they are grieving by what they say and do. No two people grieve the exact same way, but there are reactions to help you know a child or teen is grieving.

**Use simple, clear age-appropriate language.** Caregivers should explain the death in a compassionate manner using age-appropriate short, simple explanations in language children and teens can understand. It is important to use the right words to talk about the death, such as "Mom died from cancer". Avoid euphemisms like passed away or went to sleep, as they can confuse children and teens. This is key so children and teens do not associate the death with anything other than the reality of how it occurred.

**Children and teens want to be told the truth about the death.** Our instinct is to protect the children and teens from potentially difficult situations. Although it might be more comfortable for us to avoid these conversations, they are very important for the child or teen's understanding. It can be difficult to explain a stigmatized death to a child or teen, for example, death by suicide or a drug-related death.

**Be honest.** Honesty is the foundation of a trusting relationship between a caregiver and child or teens. Lying to a child or teen about the circumstances of death could lead to bitterness and mistrust when they learn the truth. Let their questions guide what you share. Speak openly and honestly about the death. It is ok not to know all the answers.

**Take time to prepare for difficult conversations.** Take some deep breaths and give yourself time to collect your thoughts. Think of this initial conversation as laying the groundwork, allowing the child or teen to ask questions and explore what they are thinking. It is not the time to share all available information. Focus on ensuring they understand what was said and explain the death was no one's fault.

**Accept this is an ongoing conversation.** The initial conversation about the death is the start of an ongoing conversation. You should be prepared to revisit the topic over time as the child grows and develops. Plan to check in with the child regularly to support them in the future.

**Listen.** When a child or teen is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions and make judgments. Remember to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating.

**Model healthy grieving.** Children and teens look to their caregivers as a role model for how people grieve. Be open with your feelings and how you are being supported.

**Allow and validate emotional expression.** It is important for children and teens who are grieving to have the space to be able to express their grief and have it validated. Validation of grief reactions occurs when adults or peers in a child's life acknowledge what the child or teen is feeling and allow the child the space needed to express their grief in a way that feels most natural to them, as long as they are not hurting themselves or others.

**Grief is long-lasting.** Grief is not an experience children or teens "get over" or "move on" from after a few weeks or months. Grief does not have a timeline and it changes over the course of someone's life. It is OK for children and teens to continue to grieve the loss as they grow and develop.

Communication with special needs children is as important as speaking with any child. If you are looking for information on how to support a child with special needs, view our [Supporting Children of All Abilities Who are Grieving Toolkit](#).



## When to Seek Additional Support

After a death, it is essential to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional. Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation

Sometimes family members may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows people who are grieving the opportunity to share their stories, understand that they are not alone, and validate and normalize their experience. It is important to embrace a family members' readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional support in your area by visiting [www.nacg.org/find-support](http://www.nacg.org/find-support).



**“The most important thing you can do for the child is to be present, kind, and compassionate.”**

**\*Inclusive Gender Statement:** In the context of this document, the use of the term “child(ren)” encompasses both boys and girls, as well as any other gender identity or gender expression that falls within the spectrum of childhood. This language choice is intended to promote inclusion and respect for the diversity of gender identities and non-binary genders.

## Suggested Resource List

The inclusion of any organization or resource in this Resource List does not imply or constitute an endorsement or recommendation, nor does exclusion imply disapproval.

### National Alliance for Children's Grief

There are a variety of resources available for free and for purchase, but the following are especially beneficial resources for funeral homes and families.

- [NACG Resource Library \(nacg.org/resources\)](https://nacg.org/resources)
- ["Grief Talks: Talking to Children about Death & Dying"](https://nacg.org/resources/grief-talks-talking-to-children-about-death-dying)
- ["Grief Talks: Talking to Children about End of Life Rituals"](https://nacg.org/resources/grief-talks-talking-to-children-about-end-of-life-rituals)
- ["When Someone Dies: A Family Activity Book"](https://nacg.org/resources/when-someone-dies-a-family-activity-book)

### Funeral Service Foundation ([funeralservicefoundation.org](https://funeralservicefoundation.org))

- [Youth and Funerals Booklet](https://funeralservicefoundation.org/youth-and-funerals-booklet)
- [When a Child Dies Booklet](https://funeralservicefoundation.org/when-a-child-dies-booklet)

### Books

- [The Centering Corporation \(centering.org\)](https://centering.org) has a lengthy list of books that can be supportive for families and grief professionals alike. Specifically for funeral homes, the following list is a good place to start. Please keep in mind that some of these books will mention specific after death beliefs that may not be applicable to all families or be inclusive of all cultures.
- In Loving Memory by Lacie Brueckner & Katherine Pendergast – two versions; for burial and cremation
- *Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?* and What Happened to Daddy's Body By Elke and Alex Barber (3+)
- Lifetimes by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (3+)
- The Next Place by Warren Hanson (5+)
- What Does That Mean? A Dictionary of Death, Dying and Grief terms for Grieving Children and Those Who Love Them by Harold Ivan Smith and Joy Johnson (8+)

### Online Resources

- [Kids and Funerals Article](https://nacg.org/resources/kids-and-funerals-article)
- [After a Death: An Activity Book for Children](https://nacg.org/resources/after-a-death-an-activity-book-for-children)
- [How to offer First Viewing Support for Kids, handout](https://nacg.org/resources/how-to-offer-first-viewing-support-for-kids-handout). A "how-to" for being present with a child who is viewing their deceased loved one for the first time.

### For Kids with Autism

- [NACG Supporting Children of All Abilities who are grieving Toolkit](https://nacg.org/resources/nacg-supporting-children-of-all-abilities-who-are-grieving-toolkit)
- [Eluna article about helping children with Autism with social stories](https://nacg.org/resources/eluna-article-about-helping-children-with-autism-with-social-stories)
- Book: *I have a Question about Death* by Arlen Gaines and Meredith Polsky



Grief Talk is an initiative of the NACG aimed at encouraging and supporting honest conversations around the topics of death and grief. This initiative has produced the following resources:

*Talking to Children About Death and Dying*  
*Telling a Child Someone has Died*  
*Talking about End of Life Memorials and Rituals*  
*Grief Talk: Schools Series*

For additional resources, visit [childrengrieve.org](http://childrengrieve.org).

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