

# How to Talk about Death with Children and Adolescents



Death is a natural experience that everyone faces at some point in their lives, yet many adults find it difficult to discuss death with children. Despite its difficulty, even the youngest of children sense that something is not normal when death occurs, and it is important to help prepare children for experiences with death. Parents, educators, and caregivers can learn to approach this conversation on an appropriate developmental level and in a nonthreatening way with children of all ages.



Brain development plays a large role in our ability to understand complex processes, such as death or dying. As we develop and grow, our brain matures, which allows us to process more complex thoughts. For an infant or toddler, the brain is not yet developed enough to understand the significance of death. However, they do recognize changes in adult behaviors and will likely imitate the behaviors of the caregiving adult. Even though they cannot understand that someone or something is gone forever, it is likely that they too will experience some stress or change in behavior in response to the death of a loved one.

As the brain matures and children become able to inquire verbally about the world around them, they will ask many questions about death (e.g., how or why?), particularly in response to the loss of a pet or loved one. Adults need to be prepared to answer questions on a developmentally appropriate level and in a nonthreatening but honest way. Understand that it is okay not to have answers to all the questions—none of us do. However, you should try to address the child’s questions with simple, short responses.

It is also important to note that preschoolers do not have the ability to understand that death is final. That is,

they believe that death is reversible, which may cause them to ask the same questions repeatedly (for example, “When is grandma coming back?”). It is important to help children understand that bodies cannot function after death. Try to begin these discussions at an early age so that children can be prepared when a loved one or pet dies.

Recognize that preschoolers and school-aged children will go through the same stages of grief as adults, but the behaviors they show may be a little different. It is normal for preschoolers to show some regressive behaviors. For example, children who have been potty trained for a considerable amount of time may start wetting themselves. Children may begin to use old coping strategies, such as using a pacifier or carrying a blanket or toy around with them. To express their anger, you may see the child begin to misbehave or throw temper tantrums. Understand that these behaviors are an expression of what the child is experiencing, and be patient with him or her during this difficult time. Allowing children opportunities to discuss their feelings through conversation, art, play, or reading will help them process these unfamiliar and difficult experiences.

School-age children and adolescents begin to understand that death is final and irreversible. This understanding can be scary and frightening for children and teens as they begin to realize that death can happen to them or their loved ones. This realization requires them to try to sort through their feelings about death, which can be very difficult. Again, it is important to recognize children's feelings and help them process not only their emotions, but also their questions and concerns about death and dying. Remember that they will often look at their adult role models to decide how to react, so being honest with your feelings is important, too. Additionally, as a parent or caregiver, you must be mindful of your grieving behaviors and how much of the day-to-day responsibilities are falling to your child or teen. If you are unable to fulfill your adult responsibilities, be sure that you have another trusted adult to help you so your children will not feel that they have to step into your role.

Death is sometimes traumatic and unexpected. However, you can take steps every day to prepare children to deal with it. Giving children tools to help them process death is important and should not be avoided. It is important to start discussing death early and in nonthreatening ways, as this can help ease children's anxieties when they experience death firsthand. Below is a list of ways to approach the topic of death or dying in nonthreatening ways. Most of the material presented below is suited for preschool and school-age children; information for teens can be found in the Additional Resources section.

## Everyday Conversations

**Start discussions about death at an early age in everyday experiences** (for example, notice leaves that have died and fallen from trees).

These discussions can help young children be better prepared for future experiences with death.

Ask questions to help children further understand what death means in regard to the body and its functions (Is the butterfly moving? What do butterflies do?).

Small conversations along the way can make a big difference in children's ability to comprehend, recognize, and deal with death when they get older.

Here are some examples of routine conversations you can have with children about death:

*Talk about where meat comes from and that the animal had to die to provide us with food.*

- grocery store
- hunting experiences
- farm visits

*Talk about the life cycle of plants.*

- rotting jack-o'-lantern
- an old tree stump that is falling apart
- falling leaves
- unwatered plants
- start a garden and let children see the plant life cycle

*Talk about the death of someone not related to you.*

- Talk about how the family of the deceased person may feel.
- If they are developmentally old enough, allow them to attend a viewing or funeral service.
- Point out the support and love that is shown during difficult times and how it can bring people together in celebration of the person's life.

*Talk about the death of a family pet.*

- Let children know it is okay to be sad and to cry; do not make them feel ashamed for showing their emotions.
- Talk about what a great life the pet lived.
- Remember how much the pet loved the child.
- Talk about the adventures the pet experienced or how he lived like a king in the house.
- Talk about how some animals live longer than others.

## Read books about death or dying.

Adults often avoid sad books about the death of a pet or loved one. But reading about death when it does not directly affect you will help your child process death in a nonthreatening way. This can be very valuable in the learning process.

It also helps to educate children about life, death, and cultural mourning ceremonies.

Here are some recommended books for everyday use:

- *The Dead Bird* by Margaret Wise Brown
- *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages* by Leo Buscaglia
- *Jim's Dog Muffins* by Miriam Cohen
- *Goodbye, Mousie* by Robie H. Harris

These books are specifically about death:

- *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton
- *Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen
- *Love Never Stops: A Memory Book for Children* by Emilio Parga
- *Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs* by Tomie dePaola
- *The Saddest Time* by Norma Simon
- *You Hold Me and I'll Hold You* by Jo Carson
- *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown
- *I Miss You: A First Look at Death* by Pat Thomas

## Firsthand Experience

If a child has lost a loved one or pet, it is important to monitor the child's behavior and listen to what he or she says. Children often can't express in words how they are feeling, which makes paying attention to their behavior especially important. Here is some basic information on how to provide nurturing and developmentally appropriate responses in this stressful situation.

**It is extremely important to provide security, support, and stability when a child is experiencing a loss.**

**Security.** Reassure children that they are going to be okay. Many times children will become concerned that they themselves or someone else they love will also die. Let them know that they are safe and protected.

**Support.** First and foremost, show the children that they are loved. Hugs or a simple touch on the hand can speak volumes to people in distress.

Let them talk or ask questions. We often try to avoid reminding the person of the situation, but avoidance can lead to additional anxieties. Let them talk about it at their own pace; don't push, but be sure they know you will be there to listen when they are ready.

**Stability.** Keep routines as consistent as possible, especially for young children. Young children thrive on knowing what is coming next. The sooner you can get them back to their normal everyday routines, the better.

Try to have consistent caregivers so that the child is not spending one night with grandmother, one night with an aunt, and so forth. Having a consistent caregiver can be critical at this stage.

**Be honest, and use appropriate terms.**

Adults often think phrases such as "She has gone to sleep" or "He went to visit Jesus" can make death easier for children to accept. However, these phrases are confusing to children and actually can cause more harm than good.

Phrases such as "Grandpa is sleeping" or "Aunt Susie is going on a trip" instead of the appropriate terms ("Grandpa died") may increase anxiety about sleeping or traveling. Young children take your statements literally and do not recognize that you are using a euphemism.

Use terms such as *died*, *death*, and *buried* to lessen confusion and anxiety about the process.

**Use simple language.**

Remember to keep answers to children's questions short and specific and to use words they understand.

The words you should use vary depending on the age of the child. The older the child, the more clinical words (heart attack, stroke) you can use, but young children need simple and specific explanations ("Grandpa's heart stopped beating").

**Be culturally sensitive.**

It is important to recognize that not all people have the same beliefs and rituals surrounding death. This is important to remember when discussing death and dying with people outside of your family.

**Recognize signs of grief and distress.**

**Stages of Grief.** Use the five stages of grief below as a guide for understanding behavior after a loved one's death. Remember:

- Not everyone will go through all the stages.
- The stages do not always follow a specific order.
- Some will experience stages multiple times.
- The stages can last a long or short amount of time.

1. **Denial/Shock.** Usually the first stage experienced; it allows us to cope at our own pace with feelings of grief.
2. **Anger.** Anger is the most commonly used emotion to manage the situation because it gives us something to focus on temporarily.
3. **Bargaining/Guilt.** This stage consists of “what if...” or “if only...” statements that we use to try to think of what could have or can be done to change the situation and put life back the way it was before the death.
4. **Depression.** This is a time of sadness and realization that the loved one is not coming back.
5. **Acceptance.** Acceptance does not mean that we are now “okay.” It means we have learned to live without the loved one and understand that this is our new normal.

## Additional Resources

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>

<http://extension.illinois.edu/grandparents/article.cfm?ID=5177&IssueID=5215>

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