

Talking with Your Child about the Death of a Loved One: Finding the Right Words

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Parents and other caregivers are often reluctant to talk with their children about the death of a loved one such as a family member, friend, or pet.

Although we naturally want to protect our children from emotional pain, we also want to prepare them for life's realities. Helping them understand and process personal loss equips our children with the tools they need to navigate life's challenges – such as the death of a loved one – with resilience.

If we initiate the conversation about a death, we can guide it with truthful and timely information. We can answer questions, preventing misunderstandings and misconceptions. We can provide immediate support and help our children begin to work through their feelings.

If we avoid talking with our children about a loss, they are likely to still sense that something is wrong. They will gather information from whatever sources are available and fill in the blanks with their own imaginations. Sometimes they will create explanations that are much scarier than reality.

Having a clear and compassionate conversation with our children also helps foster their trust in us as their caregivers. It lets them know that we can be a resource for them, especially during difficult times.

How do you talk about a death with your child?

It is important for children to hear the news as soon as possible. The longer you wait, the more likely it is that the child will learn about the death in some other less helpful way or think you are hiding something from them.

Choose a safe, comfortable place where you will not be interrupted. For younger children, sit at their level so you can make eye contact and provide physical support. For older children, it may be easier to talk without direct eye contact or while doing something else, such as riding in the car, walking, or doing another activity together.

It is okay to show emotion and cry in front of your child. It models emotional honesty and gives them permission to express their own feelings. Do not allow your emotions, however, to become the focus of the conversation.

Tell the truth about what has happened using clear, direct, and simple language. Consider starting the conversation with a straightforward statement such as “I have something important and sad to tell you. Your [name of the family member/friend/pet] died.”

Avoid euphemisms for death that can confuse or frighten children. “Passed away” is an abstract concept and difficult for children to understand. “Lost” might make them wonder why you’re not looking for the person who died. “Went to sleep” might make them afraid at bedtime, fearing that they might not wake up either.

Share information in small bits, not overwhelming your child with details. If the child was aware that the person or animal was sick, you can build on what the child already knows.

Allow for pauses in the conversation, gauging what your child can handle by the questions they ask. Tailor your answers based on your child's age and developmental level. Some children will ask lots of questions; some may end the conversation and revisit later.

Let your child know it can help to talk, even though the topic may be sad. Acknowledge and validate their feelings.

With vivid imaginations, children sometimes believe that something they said or did caused the death. Explicitly reassure your child that they did nothing wrong, no one is to blame, and the death was not their fault.

Finally, reassure your child that they are loved and are not alone. Provide comfort through holding, hugging, snuggling, and affection. Leave them with feelings of safety and a sense of control.

Talking with a child about the death of a loved one can be daunting, especially, if you are also grieving. It might be difficult to find the right words, but an honest and timely conversation using clear and loving language will help you and your child begin the grieving process and adjusting to a world that does not include the loved one who died.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.