

## **Talking with your child about death**

Having had a loved one die may have been your child's first personal experience of the death of another person. As a parent or guardian, you may find yourself having to answer many difficult and painful questions, both about this specific death, and about death in general.

Children are curious, and will probably be trying to understand what has happened and what it means even as they are grieving. You may be unused to talking about death, particularly with your child. But death is an inescapable fact of life, and it is important that we let our kids know it's okay to talk about it.

By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know, and find out about any misconceptions, fears, or worries they may have. We can then help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talk by no means solves all problems, but without talk we are even more limited in our ability to help.

There are no right words to use when talking with your child about death; the tone and manner of the communication are the important things. As much as possible, children should be told about the death of their loved one in familiar surroundings, gently, and with love and affection.

Your child may have questions for you about what happened, what it means and what will happen to them. We encourage you to explain death in basic terms. Be honest and direct. Here are some ideas: "Died" means the person is not alive anymore. Their body has stopped working. "Died" means they cannot talk, breathe, walk, move, eat or do any of the things that they could when they were alive.

If you have religious beliefs that help explain what happens when somebody dies, you may wish to share them with your child. Remember that young children can be very literal, and that, despite our best intentions sometimes our words can be frightening or confusing. "If heaven is up in the sky," some children have wondered, "Why are we burying Aunt Suzie in the ground?" Or, "If I go up in an airplane, can I see my baby sister who's in heaven?" When unknowing adults say, "Your daddy is in heaven watching over you," they usually mean to be reassuring, but to a child, those words might suggest a spy who sees and knows everything that the child thinks and does.

On the other hand, you may not hold beliefs that offer any explanation or comfort in the face of death. The temptation may be to present a simple story in hopes of soothing your kids' fears. However, children often quickly detect inconsistency and dishonesty, however well-intended. Share honest religious convictions, but be prepared for further questions. It's often more helpful to answer a child's questions about death with, "No one knows for sure, but I believe..." Saying "I wonder about that, too," is also a way of keeping the communication open.

For a child who's lost a parent, part of what allows an ongoing bond and relationship with the deceased is having gotten clear and accurate information about the death to begin with. This basic openness about the details of the death on the part of the surviving parent and the child sets a tone of openness that will help the child be with and move through grief.

Finding ways to be with other parents who are also facing the unique challenges of raising grieving children can be a wonderful support. Parents who meet together at The Children's Room often find that the opportunity to share their journeys with one another is very helpful.

## **Caring support for grieving children, teenagers, and their families.**

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