

A Child's Concept of Death

Every child has his or her own concept of death. Past experiences with death, as well as age, emotional development, and surroundings are what most influence a child's idea of death. Cartoons, movies, TV, video games, and even books are filled with images of death. The child may have experienced death of a family member, friend, or pet in the past.

An adult's feelings and fear about death are often transferred to his or her children. Treating death as a part of life is hard. But it may help ease some of the fear and confusion linked with it.

Children may be more or less mature in their thinking and processing information than others at a similar age. The following are children's ideas of death, according to common developmental ages.

Baby

Babies have no concept of death. Babies do react to separation from a parent, painful procedures, and any change in their routine. A baby who is terminally ill will need as much physical and emotional care as any age group. Keeping a consistent routine is important for a baby and their caregivers. Because babies can't talk about their needs, fear is often expressed by crying.

Toddler

For the toddler, death has very little meaning. They may feel anxious and afraid because those around them are sad, depressed, scared, or angry. Toddlers may not understand the terms "death" or "forever" or "permanent." Even with past experiences with death, the child may not understand the relationship between life and death. To them, death is not a permanent condition

Preschool

Preschool-aged children may start to understand that adults fear death. This age group may view death as temporary or reversible, as in cartoons. Death is often explained to this age group as "went to heaven." Most children in this age group don't understand that death is permanent, that everyone and every living thing will eventually die, and that dead things don't eat, sleep, or breathe. Death should not be explained as "sleep."

Their experience with death is influenced by those around them. They may ask questions about "why?" and "how?" death happens. The preschool child may feel that their thoughts or actions have caused the death and sadness of those around. They may have feelings of guilt and shame.

When children in this age group become seriously ill, they may think it's punishment for something they did or thought about. They don't understand how their parents could not have protected them from this illness.

This idea may make preschool-age siblings of a dying child feel as if they are the cause of the illness and death. Young siblings of dying children need reassurance and comforting during this time period, as well.

School-age

School-aged children have a more realistic understanding of death. Although death may be personified as an angel, skeleton, or ghost, this age group is starting to view death as permanent. They know that everyone dies. They may be very curious about the physical process of death and what happens after a person dies. They may fear their own death because of uncertainty of what happens to them after they die. Fear of the unknown, loss of control, and separation from family and friends can be the school-aged child's main sources of anxiety and fear related to death.

Teen

As with people of all ages, past experiences and emotional development greatly influence a teen's concept of death. Most teens understand that death is permanent, and that everyone dies. They may or may not have experienced the death of a family member, friend, or pet.

Teens, like adults, may want to have their religious or cultural rituals observed.

Most teens are starting to establish their identity, independence, and relation to peers. A main theme in teens is feeling immortal or being exempt from death. Their realization of their own death threatens all of these objectives. Denial and defiant attitudes may suddenly change the personality of a teen facing death. Teens may feel as if they no longer belong or fit in with their peers. They may also feel as if they are unable to communicate with their parents.

Self-image is also important to teens. A terminal illness or the effects of treatment may cause many physical changes that they must endure. Teens may feel alone in their struggle, and scared, and angry.

It's important for parents to realize that children of all ages respond to death in unique ways. Children need support and, in particular, someone who will listen to their thoughts, and reassure them to ease their fears.

Discussing Death with Children

Children of all ages need honest and accurate information about their illness, treatment options, and outlook (prognosis). Children share their fears and concerns in many ways: crying, acting out, through playing and drawing, asking repeated simple questions, ignoring others, seeking information from others, and writing letters. Let your child or teen know that these feelings of sadness, confusion, anger, and fear are all acceptable.

It's important to understand that all children and families are different. Different cultures have varying beliefs about what a child should know, so there is no one single right way to discuss death. In general, an open communication style lets the dying child express his or her fears and desires. This doesn't happen overnight. It takes time for the child and family to be able to discuss death honestly.

The goal in discussing death with a dying child is to improve his or her comfort and ease any fears. If the child isn't ready to discuss death, the most helpful step is to wait until they are ready. Let the child know you are ready to talk to them whenever they are ready to do so. Forcing information will usually result in anger, distrust, and emotional distance from others. Waiting until a child is ready to handle the situation will allow for better communication.

When discussing death, always use language that the child will understand. Consider the following:

- **Babies** don't have language skills. But they do react to physical comfort. When a baby is dying, a comforting touch and holding are as important for the baby as the caregiver. Communicating love can be expressed through a gentle touch and cuddling.
- **For toddlers and young children,** use concrete language. Don't use misleading terms for death, such as "sleep" and "passed away." A young child may be afraid to go to sleep if it is linked with death.
- **Young children** may ask very direct questions about death, if given the chance. It's important to be honest and consistent with your response. If they ask a question that you don't know the answer to, it's OK to say so, rather than make up an answer. Children at a very young age can sense falseness in an answer.

They may also get inconsistent information if answers from different people are misleading or avoid the truth.

- **Teens** may want to talk about death with a friend or someone other than a parent. Encourage communication in any manner that will help the child express his or her fears and concerns.

It's important to check the child's and family's beliefs and understanding of death and life after death when communicating with them. Children may have unexpressed fears or concerns that they are not comfortable talking about, or that they don't know how to express, including:

- **Feelings of guilt and shame.** Children may think their thoughts have caused the illness or death that has made everyone so sad. It's important to discuss with the child that healthcare providers and nurses can't always prevent death. Reassure the child that bad thoughts can't cause death. Also reassure that he or she did nothing wrong to cause the death or illness.
- **Fear that pain is linked with death.** It's important to address these fears by explaining the use of medicines to control pain. Remind your child that death itself is painless.
- **Fear of separation.** This may be addressed by using specific religious or cultural beliefs related to the body, soul, or spirit. Reassure the child that he or she will not be alone at the time of death.
- **Written communication.** Some children may communicate through play or drawing. Pay attention to their drawings and discuss them with the child. Others may write letters to their parents or loved ones to say good-bye or to indirectly ask questions. Writing lets the older child ask direct questions without visibly upsetting the parents. Some adults and children communicate best through writing small notes back and forth to one another.
- **Spiritual and cultural beliefs.** These beliefs greatly influence the death experience. Parents, members of the family's religious community, chaplains, and clergy can play an important role in discussing and explaining death to a child. Consistency is important in communicating the family's beliefs about death and/or life after death. Also, sharing these beliefs with other caregivers can limit confusion for the child.

For all age groups, let the child to set the tone for communication. Whatever he or she is most comfortable with will allow for the most effective communication.

When a Loved One Dies: How to Help Your Child

When a loved one dies, children feel and show their grief in different ways. How kids cope with the loss depends on things like their age, how close they felt to the person who died, and the support they receive.

Here are some things parents can do to help a child who has lost a loved one:

Use simple words to talk about death. Be calm and caring when you tell your child that someone has died. Use words that are clear and direct. "I have some sad news to tell you. Grandma died today." Pause to give your child a moment to take in your words.

Listen and comfort. Every child reacts in their own way when they learn that a loved one has died. Some kids cry. Some ask questions. Others seem not to react at all. That's OK. Stay with your child to offer hugs or comfort. Answer your child's questions. Or just be together for a few minutes. It's OK if your child sees your sadness or tears.

Put feelings into words. Ask kids to say what they're thinking and feeling. Label some of your own feelings. This makes it easier for kids to share theirs. Say things like, "I know you're feeling very sad. I'm sad, too. We both loved Grandma so much, and she loved us too."

Tell your child what to expect. If the death of a loved one means changes in your child's life or routine, explain what will happen. This helps your child feel prepared. For example, "Aunt Sara will pick you up from school like Grandma used to." Or, "I need to stay with Grandpa for a few days. That means you and Dad will be home taking care of each other. But I'll talk to you every day, and I'll be back on Sunday."

Explain events that will happen. Allow children to join in rituals like viewings, funerals, or memorial services. Tell them ahead of time what will happen. For example, "Lots of people who loved Grandma will be there. We will sing, pray, and talk about Grandma's life. People might cry and hug. They might say to us, 'I'm sorry for your loss.' We can say, 'Thank you,' or, 'Thanks for coming.' You can stay near me and hold my hand if you want."

You might need to explain burial or cremation. For example, "After the funeral, there is a burial at a cemetery. The person's body is in a casket (or coffin) that gets buried in the ground with a special ceremony. This can feel like a sad goodbye, and people might cry." Share your family's beliefs about what happens to a person's soul or spirit after death.

Explain what will happen after the service, too. For example, "We all will go eat food together. People will laugh, talk, and hug some more. Talking about happy times with Grandma and being together helps people start to feel better."

Give your child a role. Having a small, active role lets kids feel part of things and helps them cope. You might invite your child to read a poem, pick a song to be played, gather some photos to display, or make something. Let kids decide if they want to take part, and how.

Help your child remember the person. In the days and weeks ahead, encourage your child to draw pictures or write down stories of their loved one. Don't avoid talking about the person who died. Sharing happy memories helps heal grief.

Give comfort and reassure your child. Notice if your child seems sad, worried, or upset in other ways. Ask about feelings and listen. Let your child know that it takes time to feel better after a loved one dies. Some kids may have trouble sleeping or have fears or worries. Let kids know these things will get better. Give them extra time and care. Support groups and counseling can help kids who need more support.

Help your child feel better. Provide the comfort your child needs but don't dwell on sad feelings. After a few minutes of talking and listening, shift to an activity or topic that helps your child feel a little better. Play, make art, cook, or go somewhere together.

Give your child time to heal from the loss. Grief is a process that happens over time. Be sure to talk often and listen to see how your child is feeling and doing. Healing doesn't mean forgetting

about your loved one. It means remembering the person with love. Loving memories stir good feelings that support us as we go on to enjoy life.

Get more help if needed. If a loved one's death was sudden, deeply stressful, or violent, a child may need [therapy](#) to help them heal. If your child's distress lasts for more than a few weeks, or if you think your family needs more help, talk with your child's doctor. They can help you find the right therapist to work with.

The Do's and Don'ts of Talking with a Child about Death

It's never easy to deal with death.

As adults, it overwhelms us. And it's even harder for children to move through. Though we know it's an inevitable part of life, talking about death is something most of us aren't really good at because the subject is so painful.

As many of us know, death occurs in many ways. It may be sudden, expected, prolonged or accidental. Part of the experience is finding ways to express what's happened, to make sense of what's happened, and finally, to accept what's happened.

Here are some tips to help you talk about death with your child:

Do's

- **Tell the truth about what happened right away.** The truth gives an explanation for your tears and pain. Being open and emotional can help your child learn how to mourn.
- **Be prepared for a variety of emotional responses.** Realize that however you approach this subject, your child will be upset, and perhaps, even angry at the loss. Accept your

child's emotional reactions. You will have time to address things again after your child's had time to process the initial trauma.

- **Make sure to use the words dead or died.** Many find using the words *dead* or *died* uncomfortable - and prefer using phrases like, passed away, lost, crossed over, went to sleep - but research shows that using realistic words to describe death helps the grieving process.
- **Share information in doses.** Gauge what your child can handle by giving information in small bits at a time. You'll know what more to do based on the questions your child asks.
- **Be comfortable saying, "I don't know."** Having all the answers is never easy, especially during a time of such heartache. It's helpful to tell your child that you may not know about certain things, like, "How did grandpa die?" "What happens to Aunt Rita at the funeral home," "What made Spike run into the street, Mommy?" or other unanswerable questions.
- **Cry.** Cry together. Cry often. It's healthy and healing.
- **Allow your child to participate in rituals.** Let children pick clothing for your loved one, photos for the memorial, a song or spiritual reading. This will help them gain a sense of control of the traumatic loss.
- **Let your child grieve in his or her own way.** Allow your child to be silent about the death. It's also natural for a child to feel lonely and isolate themselves at this time too. It's also common for children to seem unaffected by the loss. There is no right way to grieve.
- **Prepare your child for what they will see in the funeral home or service.** Tell children what they will see, who will be there, how people may be feeling and what they will be doing. For young children, be specific in your descriptions of what the surroundings will look like. For example, describe the casket and clothes and that the body will be posed. Or if it's a memorial service, talk about where the body is, if it's been cremated, in a closed coffin or already buried. Bring along someone to care for the child if you are distraught.
- **Prepare your child for the future without your loved one.** Talk about how it will feel to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and special moments without your loved one. Ask your child to help plan how to move through the next calendar event.
- **Prepare to talk about thoughts and feelings often.** It is likely that you'll have to tend to the subject of death for days, weeks and months to come. Check in and be available for ongoing discussions since mourning is a process.
- **Remember to take care of yourself.** As parents, we sometimes forget about taking care of ourselves during this time. Children learn what they see, so be a role model for self-care at this critical time.

Don'ts

- **Don't hide your grief from your child.** Seeing you grieve during and long after your loved ones death will let child know that it's normal and healthy to cry and feel sad after significant loss.
- **Don't be afraid to share memories of your loved one.** Sometimes parents feel afraid to talk about the person who has died, thinking it will cause pain to others. Research

shows that the pain of re-living memories or sharing stories actually aids in healing and closure.

- **Don't avoid connecting with your child because you feel helpless or uncomfortable, or don't know what to say.** Sometimes a knowing look can be a powerful connection. Even a touch or a hug can offer great comfort.
- **Don't change the subject when your child comes into the room.** Doing so places a mark of taboo on the subject of death. Instead, adjust your wording and level of information when a child is present.
- **Don't change your daily routine.** Children need consistency. Try as much as possible to keep your usual daily routines at home and at work. Also, try to ensure that your child continues to take part in their usual activities like school and social events.
- **Don't think that death puts a ban on laughter.** Laughter is a great healing tool. Being about to laugh about memories or moments with your loved one signals just how important their presence was in your life.
- **Don't put a time limit on your child's bereavement – or your own.** Everyone grieves in their own way. Recognize that a *new normal* will have to occur - and that time is needed to readjust to a significant death. If you need additional support, reach out to your child's school, physician, or religious community. Professional help with a mental health therapist trained in bereavement can be sought as well.