

Talking to Kids About Death

Discussing death with your kids can be a real concern and many tend to avoid it. Death is however an inevitable part of life and it is our responsibility to ensure our kids are aware of it and know it's okay to discuss it.

If we allow children to talk to us about death, we can give them needed information, prepare them for a crisis, and help them when they are upset. We can encourage their communication by showing attention and respect for what they have to say. We can also make it easier for them to talk to us if we are open, honest, and at ease with our own feelings.

Death is very much a part of our lives on many different levels. We may be surprised at how aware children already are about death. They see dead insects, dead birds and animals on the road or a family pet may have died. Children read about death in their fairy tales, watch it in cartoons and even role-play death in school plays. Without realising it they already have some exposure to the concept.

Problems That Make Discussing Death Difficult

1. **We avoid talking about things that upset us.** We bottle it up and hope that by saying nothing will help it go away. Children are sensitive barometers of emotion and are tremendous observers. They know something is wrong by simply watching us. Our body language, emotions on our faces, what we say and what we don't say are all communicating a message to our kids. When we choose not to discuss an issue with our kids they too hesitate to ask questions. They automatically think "If Mummy and Daddy are so upset that they can't talk about it, I had better not talk about it either.....it must be bad!". This causes our kids to stress and worry more as they don't know how we are feeling.
2. **We feel uncomfortable when we don't have all the answers.** As a teacher and parent myself, kids will often expect us to know everything, even all about death. Take it as a compliment and know that they look up to us. It is okay to say to your child "I'm not sure myself about that" or "I just don't know the answer to that". Children respond to this honesty beautifully and feel connected in our openness towards them. It helps them feel better about not knowing everything also. In discussing death, we may find different answers at different stages in our life or grieving process. Share with children your beliefs. Expose them to the belief of others, for example some people believe in afterlife, others do not. Allow them to be comforted in knowing your beliefs and allow them to choose their own.
3. **Death is often a taboo subject**— in some cultures death is an integral part of family life. People died in their home environment, surrounded by loved ones (adults and children alike). They comforted each other and mourned together. Unfortunately today death is much lonelier. Many people die in isolation and loved ones miss sharing their last moments. The living has in some ways become separated from the dying; consequently, death has taken on added mystery and, for some, added fear.

Help to diminish this trend and openly discuss death with your child when an appropriate time arises. Model appropriate behavior regarding death, for example express your sympathy towards someone who has lost a loved one in front of your child. Show them that it is kind to acknowledge a loss and express care towards others.

Developmental Stages of Understanding – A General Guide

- Preschool children mostly see death as temporary, reversible and impersonal. In stories they read or watch characters will often suddenly rise up alive again after being totally destroyed. It's not surprising they don't understand, yet it is appropriate for their age level to think this way.
- Between the ages of five and nine, most children are beginning to see that all living things eventually die and that death is final. They tend to not relate it to themselves and consider the idea that they can escape it. They may associate images with death, such as a skeleton. Some children have nightmares about them.
- From nine through to adolescence, children begin to understand fully that death is irreversible and that they too will die one day.

It is important to remember however that all children develop at different rates and that children experience life uniquely. They have their own personal ways of handling and expressing emotions.

It is not uncommon for a three year old to ask questions about death, for a child to be openly unconcerned about the death of a grandparent yet devastated over the death of a pet. Some children show their understanding of death through playing with their toys.

It is important to explain death in simple terms for young children. For example, when someone dies they don't breathe, or eat, or feel hungry or cold and you won't be able to see them again.

No matter how children cope with death or express their feelings, they need sensitive and nonjudgmental responses from adults. Careful listening and observing are important ways to learn how to respond appropriately to a child's needs.

Talking About Death with Preschoolers or Young Children

Many people feel challenged when approaching the subject of death to preschoolers and young children. They in particular need brief and simple explanations. Using concrete and familiar examples may help. For example, death may be made more clear by explaining it in terms of the absence of familiar life functions – when people die they do not breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel any more; when dogs die they do not bark or run any more; dead flowers do not grow or bloom any more.

Children learn through repetition so they may need to go over this quite a few times. A child may immediately ask more questions, others may be silent, then wish to revisit the subject again later. Children sometimes get confused with what they hear so it is important you check their understanding by revisiting the subject at appropriate times.

As time passes and children have new experiences, they will need further explanations and sharing of ideas and thoughts.

It may take time for a child to comprehend fully the ramifications of death and its emotional implications. A child who knows that Uncle Tom has died may still ask why Aunt Julie is crying. The child needs an answer. "Aunt Julie is crying because she is sad that Uncle Tom has died. She misses him very much. We all feel sad when someone we care about dies."

There are also moments when we have trouble "understanding" what children are asking us. A question that may seem dreadfully thoughtless to an adult may be a child's request for reassurance. For instance, a question such as, "When will you die?" needs to be heard with the realization that the young child perceives death as temporary.

While the permanency of death is not yet fully understood, a child may think that death means separation, and separation from parents and the loss of care involved are frightening.

Being cared for is a realistic and practical concern, and a child needs to be reassured. Possibly the best way to answer a question is by asking a clarifying question in return: "Are you worried that I won't be here to take care of you?" If that is the case, the reassuring and appropriate answer would be something like, "I don't expect to die for a long time. I expect to be here to take care of you as long as you need me, but if I did die, there are lots of people to take care of you. There's Daddy, Aunt Laura and Uncle John or Nan."

It is important to check which words you use when discussing death with your kids. Some children confuse death with sleep, particularly if they hear adults refer to death with one of the many euphemisms for sleep – "they died in their sleep", "eternal rest," "rest in peace." Resulting from this confusion, a child may be afraid of going to bed, in case they don't wake up either! Similarly, if children are told that someone who died "went away", brief separations may begin to worry them. Grandpa "went away" and hasn't come back yet. Maybe Mummy won't come back from the shops or from work. Therefore, it is important to avoid such words as "sleep", "rest," or "went away" when talking to a child about death.

To avoid confusion with preschoolers and very young children, it helps to explain that only very serious illness may cause death. When they hear that sickness was the cause of death, we don't want them to assume that minor ailments are a cause for major concern.

When a child associates death only with old age, they can become very confused when they learn that young people can die too. It is important to explain that *most* people live a long time, but some don't. However we do expect that we will live a very long time (always reassure them)!

Religious References

Religion is a real source of strength for many people in a time of grieving. If however religion has not played a part in your child's life before dealing with death, it may be very confusing and worrying to hear religious references. For example, the explanation "Big sister is with God now" may comfort an adult, but frighten a child. They may fear that God will come and take them

away as He did big sister. Ensure that your child has an affiliation for your terms so they feel familiar and can understand.

Other messages may confuse children, including statements such as “Tommy is happy in Heaven with the angels”. They may wonder why everyone is so unhappy when they say that Tommy is happy. They need to hear about the sadness being felt from losing Tommy, along with our expressions of religious faith.

It is important to help children understand the realities of death, being the loss and the grief. Trying to shelter children from these realities only denies them from the opportunity to express their feelings and be comforted. Sharing feelings between you and your child will benefit you both.

Other Opportunities to Talk About Death

Children tend to be extremely curious when they discover death, particularly dead flowers, birds, trees and insects. This may open windows of opportunity to discuss death further and answer all the detailed questions that may arise. Try to reinforce the concept that all living things eventually die, but it makes room for new things to join us on earth.

Other opportunities to discuss death with your kids arise when well-known persons die and their funeral receives a lot of media coverage. This is a natural time to clarify any misunderstandings they may have about death. If the death is violent or aggressive however, you need to reassure your child that they are safe and most people do not behave this way towards each other.

Attending Funerals

If your child is to attend a funeral, they need to be prepared beforehand for what they might see and hear before, during and after the service. Explain that it is a very sad occasion and that some people will be crying and others feeling very sad.

Seat your child next to you or someone they are familiar with who is able to cope with their questions and be prepared to offer explanations. If your child prefers to not attend the funeral, they must not be forced.

Mourning

We all need to mourn in order to heal our sorrows and move on in our lives. By being open with our emotions and showing our sorrow and tears, expresses to our children that it is okay that they also feel sad and cry. We should never associate tears and expressing feelings with weakness.

Children often feel guilty and angry when they lose a close family member. They need reassurance that they have been, and will continue to be, loved and cared for.

In Summary

A grieving child needs information that is clear and comprehensible for their development level. They need a lot of reassurance that they are safe and loved and be made feel that they can discuss their feelings openly. Children need to maintain their activities and interests as they desire and revisit questions regularly.

When preparing a child for an anticipated death, allow them to help care for the dying person if they desire, receive lots of affection and answer questions, be given information about the physical, emotional, and mental condition of the terminally ill person and be given a choice of visiting or remaining away.

Talking with Preschoolers About Death

When questions about death come up, either because someone close to your preschooler has died or she's struggling to understand the concept, you may be stumped about how best to respond.

There are no "perfect" answers — the most important thing is to answer your child's queries as patiently, simply, and gently as possible and to understand that her concerns and reactions will be different from yours.

Expect to have to repeat your answers over and over again, and provide plenty of reassurance that you're there to love and care for her. (If, on the other hand, your preschooler hasn't yet expressed curiosity about death, it's better to hold off on your discussion until she does.)

Here are some of kids' most common questions about death, plus guidance for answering them in a way that preschoolers will understand:

"What does 'dead' mean?" Related questions include those about how the dead continue to function — "How did Grandpa get up to heaven? What does he like to eat up there?" — since a preschooler doesn't grasp the absence of physical activity.

Gently explain: " 'Dead' means a person or animal stops breathing and his or her body doesn't work anymore. They don't eat or sleep or feel cold or hot. Plants die too — every living thing does. Usually people and animals only die when they've grown very old."

"When will you die?" Children often ask questions that seem shocking or callous to adults. What your preschooler really means is, "Will I still be taken care of?"

Even if she doesn't ask outright, it's wise to anticipate worries about how stable her life will be: "I want you to know that I plan to be here until I'm very, very old and you're all grown up."

"Why is Aunt Sally crying?" If you've just explained that Uncle John died, such a question may seem strange. But your preschooler's understanding of death is still sketchy enough that she needs help understanding the emotions of those around her: "Uncle John died and he won't come back, and Aunt Sally is crying because she misses him very much."

"When will Grandpa come back? Will he be here for my birthday?" Related questions include things like, "Can we drive to heaven to visit Grandpa?" Although you've explained the death seemingly endless times, your preschooler still doesn't grasp its finality and permanence.

Explain as patiently as you can, "Remember that Grandpa died. He can't come back and we can't visit him. He won't be here for your birthday, but we'll remember the times he was here."

"Can Grandma get a new Grandpa now?" Because adults can often fix or replace things in our daily lives, children may wonder about replacing the deceased — especially if they have friends with step-grandparents.

Gently give her the facts: "If she wants to, Grandma might get married again someday. But her new husband wouldn't be the same as Grandpa. Grandpa died and can't come back."

"Was it my fault?" At this age, kids are all ego, and believe that their thoughts and actions affect everything around them.

"If a child was mad at the dog for destroying one of her toys, and maybe even said, 'I'm gonna kill you,' and then a few weeks later the dog dies, she can easily think, 'I caused that,' " says Michael Towne, a grief specialist at the University of California-San Francisco Medical Center.

Though your preschooler probably won't say it out loud, feelings of guilt are common and worth anticipating.

Give her reassurance even if she never vocalizes such thoughts: "I want you to know that the dog died because he was very old, and his body wasn't working very well any more. None of us did anything to make that happen."

"Did it hurt the baby to die? Will you die too?" The mechanics of miscarriage can be very confusing to children.

Tell her, "No, the baby just stopped growing and doesn't feel anything anymore. Daddy and I are very, very sad, but we're still healthy. So are you."

"Did Uncle John die because he did something bad?" Try to make sure your preschooler never equates death with punishment: "No, definitely not. Your uncle died in a car crash that was a terrible accident, but it wasn't his fault that he died, and it wasn't because he did anything bad."

"I remember Daddy used to snuggle with me when I was a baby." If your child shares memories that she clearly can't really have, don't correct her. This just means the lost loved one is real to her, and stories like this bring her a tremendous amount of comfort.

Young Children and Death

What to expect at this age

Death is one of the hardest subjects to broach with young children, especially when you're struggling to deal with your own sorrow. But death is also an inescapable part of life, and children want to understand it and find ways to grieve that feel natural.

Preschoolers are aware of death from early on. They hear about it in fairy tales, see it on TV, and encounter dead bugs, birds, or squirrels on the sidewalk or roadside. Some children may have already experienced the death of a pet or a family member.

Despite this, there are aspects of death that kids this age still can't understand. For example, they can't grasp that death is permanent, inevitable, and happens to everyone, explains Michael Towne, a child-life specialist who works with grieving families at the University of California-San Francisco Medical Center.

Nor can they comprehend that being dead means that the body no longer functions. They may believe that the deceased still eat, sleep, and do normal things — except that they do them up in the sky or down in the ground.

No matter how many times you explain it, preschoolers can't really understand what causes death, and they may think of it as something that's temporary and reversible. Even when a parent or a sibling has died, preschoolers often don't see death as something that can happen to them.

Kids this age react to death in a variety of ways. Don't be surprised if your child becomes clingy, regresses in toilet training, reverts to baby talk, or suddenly balks at going to her familiar preschool. After all, her daily routines may have been interrupted, she's struggling to understand why the adults around her are so sad, and the world may suddenly seem ominous to her in a way that it hadn't before.

On the other hand, she may not show any reaction to the death at all, or her responses may be intermittent, mixed in with her usual cheerfulness and play.

This is normal, too. Children process grief in bite-sized chunks, not all at once. And many delay grieving until they feel it's safe to let those feelings out — a process that could take months or even years, particularly if they've lost a parent or a sibling.

Your preschooler may also engage in behaviors that seem odd to you, such as playing dead. This too is normal, even if it strikes you as morbid, so don't discourage this important way for her to work through her feelings about death.

How to explain death to your preschooler

Don't dodge her questions. It's normal for your preschooler to be curious about death, even if she hasn't yet lost a loved one. In fact, less emotionally fraught times are good opportunities for laying groundwork that will help your child cope when she *does* lose someone.

Answer her questions about death, and don't be afraid to read stories about children whose pets or grandparents die.

Give brief, simple answers. Young children can't handle too much information at once. At this age, it's most helpful to explain death in terms of physical functions that have ceased, rather than launching into a complicated discussion of a particular illness: "Now that Uncle John has died, his body has stopped working. He can't walk or run, or eat or sleep or see anymore, and he doesn't feel any pain."

It's also important to help a preschooler understand basics such as who's going to take care of her. "She thinks, 'If Mom dies, who's going to give me my bath?'" says grief specialist Michael Towne.

Express your own emotions. Grieving is an important part of healing, for both children and adults. Don't frighten your child with excessive grief, but don't make the subject off-limits, either.

Explain that grownups need to cry sometimes, too, and that you feel sad because you miss Grandma. Your preschooler is keenly aware of changes in your mood, and she'll be even more worried if she senses that something is wrong but that you're trying to hide it.

Avoid euphemisms. Common adult phrases for death — "resting in peace," "in eternal sleep" — are confusing for a young child, so don't say that Grandpa is "sleeping" or "has gone away." Your preschooler may worry that going to bed at night means she'll die, too, or that if you leave for the office or the store, you won't come back.

State the reasons for the death as simply as possible: "Grandpa was very, very old and his body couldn't work anymore." If Grandpa was sick before he died, be sure to reassure your child that if she gets sick from a cold or flu, it doesn't mean she'll die. Explain that there are different ways people get sick, and that we recover from minor illnesses like the ones your child usually has.

Tread carefully when discussing God and heaven. Explanations of death and the afterlife will of course depend on your own religious beliefs. If the concepts of God and heaven will enter into your conversation, think carefully about what you'll say, since words meant to comfort a small child may actually confuse her.

If you tell your preschooler, "Janie's happy now, because she's in heaven," for instance, she may worry: How can Janie really be happy if everyone around me is so sad? If you say, "Janie was so good that God wanted her with him," she's likely to think: If God wanted to take Janie, will he

take me too? Should I be good so I can be with her in heaven, or bad so I can stay here with Mom and Dad?

Something along the lines of, "We're so sad that Janie isn't here with us and we'll miss her very much, but it's comforting to know that she's with God now," will reassure your child without adding to her worries.

Be prepared for a variety of reactions. Children not only feel sorrow over the death of a loved one, they may also feel guilt or anger. Reassure your preschooler that nothing she said or did caused the death, and don't be surprised if she expresses anger toward you, the doctors and nurses, or even the deceased.

Also expect that she may have tantrums more often, either as a way to get her own sadness out (though the tantrum may appear to be about something else) or as a reaction to the tension and sadness in your household.

Expect the subject to come up repeatedly. Be ready to field the same questions from your child over and over again, since understanding the permanence of death is a struggle for her.

She's also likely to come up with new questions as her awareness of death and her cognitive skills grow, grief counselors say. Don't worry that you didn't explain the death adequately the first time — your child's ongoing questions are normal. Just keep answering them as patiently as you can.

Memorialize the deceased. Children need concrete ways to mourn the death of a loved one. Your preschooler may not be ready to attend a funeral (particularly an open-casket wake), but she can participate in memorial services in whatever ways she might feel comfortable. She can light a candle at home, sing a song, draw a picture, or take part in some other ritual observance.

If she does want to attend the funeral or other service, carefully explain beforehand what the body will look like, what a coffin is, how other people may be acting, and as many other details about the event as possible.

It also helps to talk about the good relationship she had with the person who died: "Remember when you and Grandma went blueberry picking? She had so much fun with you."

Discuss miscarriage. If you and your partner have experienced a miscarriage, you'll undoubtedly grieve. But you may be surprised to discover that your preschooler is also upset, even if her understanding of the pregnancy was still a bit sketchy.

She may feel guilty over the death, or mourn the loss of the "big sister" role you'd been preparing her for. And she'll need lots of encouragement to believe that this kind of death is uncommon, especially if you try for another baby.

Explain that babies who miscarry are usually not healthy enough to live outside their mommy's tummy. Let your child say goodbye by drawing a picture or making a special gift for the departed baby.

Don't downplay the death of a pet. This is many children's first brush with death, and it can be a deeply tragic event for them. A family dog or cat is often a child's first and best playmate, offering unconditional love and companionship. Feeding the parakeet or goldfish regularly may have made her feel proud and grown up.

Try not to say, "Don't feel bad, Rover is in heaven now" — this teaches her that her very real sadness is inappropriate. Instead, offer her lots of sympathy for her loss, and expect the same kinds of ongoing mourning and repeated questions that you'd get if a person she cared for had died.

Help her respond to media coverage of death. Your child may still be somewhat oblivious to the widely publicized deaths of media figures or to news coverage of national disasters or wars. But she *will* pick up on the fact that you're sad or anxious, and she's also likely to hear older children discussing these events.

Reassure her that "people are angry and fighting far away," and that that makes you sad, but that you're there to take care of her and will do everything you can to keep her safe.

Do your best to get your preschooler's life back to "normal." Don't compound your child's loss by abandoning the schedule and activities that anchor her life and give her a sense of security.

Some upset is to be expected, of course, but the sooner your preschooler's routine gets back to normal, the easier it will be for her. She needs to get to bed on time, get up on time, eat meals on time, and, if she's in nursery school, go back to the friends and fun she has there.

Don't try to be perfect. If you're deeply bereaved by a recent death, do your best to guide your child through the difficult times, but don't expect yourself to be perfect. It's all right to cry in front of your child, and you can't expect yourself to answer every question perfectly the first time.

Ask for help from friends and relatives, and remember that the more you help *yourself* cope, the better you'll be able to help your child cope, both now and later.