



How to Discuss Death with Children & Teens

by The National Alliance for Children's Grief

Sharing the News of the Death

If you are caring for a child or teen who has experienced a death in their life, you may wonder how to share this news with them. It is perfectly natural to feel nervous or fearful of talking with a child about this emotional topic. Before initiating a conversation with the child, there are some general principles to consider, who will deliver the news and when, where, and how the conversation takes place.

The person who shares the news should be the person to whom the child feels the closest. This is often a parent, but not always. If the parent is the person who has died, a grandparent or another relative may be called upon to talk with the child. If you are the person who will be talking with the child, check in with yourself first: Do you have the support you need? Do you have the information you would like to share in the conversation? You are not expected to have all the answers but having enough information to begin the conversation is essential. You may imagine how the conversation might go or choose to practice with a friend or family member before talking with the child.

Where and when the news is shared can influence how it is received. A calm, safe space where you will not be interrupted is ideal. This may be the child's home or another familiar place where they feel safe. You may consider having some comfort items present and available to the child – perhaps a pet, stuffed animal, or special blanket. The timing of when to approach this conversation is important to consider. Ideally, it is soon enough after the death to ensure that they hear the news from you first, not from a stranger or social media. This allows you to control the message that is shared and build in time to support the child.

You will want to be as prepared as possible to answer questions and allow the child to share and process their feelings. Depending on the child's age and developmental level, this may or may not happen immediately. The child may have additional questions or have a need to lead the conversation. Our instinct is often to protect the child from the truth, particularly with stigmatized (suicide, homicide, or drug overdose) or graphic deaths. However, children often know more than we realize.

Start simply and plan to layer on additional information over time. Provide the opportunity for

the child to repeat their understanding of what they heard you say, then restate or clarify if needed. The most important thing you can do for the child is to be present, kind, and compassionate.

Some children, especially younger children, may not respond as we might expect. They may not cry or even seem to understand what you have shared. Children often need to go away and be by themselves or play. A child choosing to play does not indicate that they did not understand or care about the death. Play can be a powerful way for children to process the news.

Provide opportunities for small conversations over time. Invite the child to talk with you anytime and encourage their questions. If there are multiple children of different ages and different needs, they may each respond differently. Provide opportunities for each child to follow up one on one. This will allow them each some special time to talk, ask questions, and begin to process the news.

The initial conversation about the death is the start of a lifelong conversation. You should be prepared to revisit the topic over time as the child grows and develops. Plan to check in with the child regularly to support them in navigating the difficult times ahead.

10 Key Points to Remember When Talking to Children and Teens about Death and Dying

1) Grief is individual. Children and teens usually do not tell you they are grieving by what they say and do. No two people grieve the same way, but some reactions can help you know a child or teen is grieving.

2) Use simple, straightforward, age-appropriate language. Caregivers should compassionately explain the death using age-appropriate short, simple explanations in language children and teens can understand. It is important to use the right words to talk about the death, like “Mom died from cancer.” Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, as they can confuse children and teens. This is key so that children and teens do not associate the death with anything other than the reality of how it occurred.

3) Children and teens want to be told the truth about the death. It can be challenging to explain a stigmatized death to a child or teen, for example, death from suicide or drug-related death. Our instinct is to protect the children and teens from heartbreaking situations; although it might be more comfortable for us to avoid these conversations, they are essential for the child or teen’s understanding.

4) Be honest. Honesty is the foundation of a trusting relationship between a caregiver and child or teens. Lying to a child or teen about the circumstances of death could lead to bitterness and mistrust when they learn the truth. Let their questions guide what you share. Speak openly and honestly about the death. It is ok not to know all the answers.

5) Take time to prepare for difficult conversations. Take some deep breaths and give yourself time to collect your thoughts. Think of this initial conversation as laying the groundwork, allowing the child or teen to ask questions and explore what they are thinking. It is not the time to share all available information. Focus on ensuring they understand what was said and explain that the death was no one's fault.

6) Accept that this is an ongoing conversation. Younger children might need to be told many times as they might repeatedly ask how the person died.

7) Listen. When a child or teen is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions and make judgments. What is most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating.

8) Model healthy grieving. Children and teens look to their caregivers as role models for how people grieve. Share your feelings with them as long as they are relieved of the task of trying to "fix it."

9) Allow and validate emotional expression. It is important for children and teens who are grieving the space to be able to express their grief and have it validated. Validation of grief reactions occurs when adults or peers in a child's life acknowledge what the child or teen is feeling and allow the child the space needed to express their grief in the most natural way to them as long as they are not hurting themselves or others.

10) Grief is long-lasting. Grief is not an experience that children or teens "get over" or "move on" from after a few weeks or months. Grief does not have a timeline, and it changes over the course of someone's life. It is OK for children and teens to continue to grieve the loss as they grow and develop.

Establish Routine, Roles, and Safety

It may seem as though everything changes when someone dies. Developing new routines may seem counter-intuitive, yet they may serve to help offer some sense of normalcy in what may be an otherwise chaotic situation. Asking for your children's input about how they would like to proceed can be an excellent way to offer them some control over a situation that may feel very uncontrollable. Caregivers are encouraged to engage children and teens in deciding on new routines as this could lead to some conversations that you may not otherwise have had.

Maintaining family expectations and structure support children and teens in feeling more secure within themselves and their families. Death brings so many shattered beliefs about how the world works and the predictability of life, and as a result, children and teens who are grieving may need structure more than ever. While keeping the family rules and expectations, it is also essential to allow exceptions. Children and teens who are grieving often struggle with their own emotions and how to cope with what is going on around them. When caregivers show understanding and compassion, this enables a child or teen grieving the freedom to explore their feelings in healthier ways for the child and the entire family.

The death of your person impacts everyone related to the deceased. Family members may find that their existing roles have or will change. It is important to acknowledge these changes in roles and equally important to talk about how you feel about the changes while remembering that death may end a life, but it does not have to end the relationship.

There is a particular vulnerability that can occur when someone dies. This can be especially true for children and teens. It is not uncommon to see and hear children and teens worry about a caregiver's health, their physical safety, and how their environment has changed. Children and teens need to be asked questions such as "What do you need to feel safe?" or "What has helped you feel safe in the past?" Offering suggestions can be helpful as children and teens may not know what they need to feel safe such as a night light or leaving the door open. This is a great time to discuss how the whole family can address fears and coping strategies to help feel safe and secure going forward. This includes safety plans, safe words, and identifying people they can rely on.

Supporting Children and Teens During Milestones, Events, or Ceremonies

Children and teens who are grieving should be invited to participate in milestones, events, and ceremonies that involve honoring or remembering the person or people in their lives who have died. This can help them stay connected to the person in a way that is very meaningful and beneficial to coping and healing. One of the things that children and teens understand is that people may die, but their love for them never dies.

It is not unusual for children and teens to talk to the person who has died or wonder what advice their person would give them now as they get older. Staying connected can bring immense comfort to them. Children and teens often want reassurance that the person who died will not be forgotten. When deciding how to remember or honor the person who died, invite children and teens to give input about what would be meaningful to them. If it is taking flowers somewhere special, ask children and teens to help pick out the flowers. If it is a birthday or special day that the family is remembering, ask them how they would like to celebrate. Sometimes, caregivers might have to provide some suggestions. For example,

“Would you like to go to the person’s favorite restaurant or make the person’s favorite meal?”

Encouraging input from all members of the family can be very supportive. This is important because there will most likely be differences in how family members want to honor or remember the person who died, as everyone had their unique relationship with the person. Additionally, each child or teen in the family will be coping differently. Therefore, some rituals will be comforting or meaningful to one child but not necessarily to another, so asking for their input is very important.

When to Seek Additional Support

After a death, it is essential to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members’ behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional. Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or suicidal ideation

Sometimes family members may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections allow the griever to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows people who are grieving the opportunity to share their stories, understand that they are not alone, and validate and normalize their experiences. It is important to embrace a family member’s readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional support in your area by visiting childrengrieve.org/find-support.

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