



FIRST MCKINNEY CHILDREN

Talking to your children about death

Death is a difficult topic to discuss with a young child, especially if you are struggling to deal with your own grief and loss. However, death is an unavoidable aspect of life and your child will need to understand it and find his own way to grieve.

Children of all ages are confronted with that inevitable moment when life no longer exists: a pet is killed, a grandparent dies, a natural disaster kills many lives or even a character in a cartoon or movie dies. You may wonder how much children understand or how best to talk about death and dying. An important factor to consider is the developmental age of the child. The following information will outline general guidelines in talking to children of different developmental ages. These guidelines are very general, and you as a parent should realize that we all, including children, grieve and understand death in our own unique ways.



Developmental Stages – A General Guide

Ages birth to 2: Children of this age have little to no understanding of death. They have no cognitive ability to grasp this complex concept.

Ages 3 to 5: Young children still believe that death is reversible. It is not unusual for a preschool child to believe that the person will come home. They may demonstrate “magical” thinking and believe that if they are “good” enough the person who has died will return.

Ages 6 to 9: Children of this age begin to understand that all living things eventually die and that death is final. However, they may believe that death only happens to others. Children of this age will be very fascinated with the concrete details about death, funerals, and burials.

Ages 9 to 12: Older children begin to have a more mature understanding of death around the age of 10. They understand that death is permanent and cannot be reversed. They also begin to understand that they too will die some day.

Early Teens and Adolescents: Teens clearly understand the significance of death. However, death often raises philosophical questions about the meaning of life. Teens typically feel immortal, and death represents a special challenge to their sense of security.

****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.**

Talking About Death With Preschoolers or Young Children

Many people feel especially challenged when approaching the subject of death with preschoolers and young children. Here are some additional tips for talking with younger children.

Preschool children need brief and simple explanations.

Using concrete and familiar examples may help. 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.

Young children learn through repetition.

It will often be necessary to repeat these types of conversations more than once. Follow the child's lead and attention span. Shorter conversations throughout the process may be easier for a young child to digest. Also, it may take time for a child to comprehend fully the ramifications of death and its emotional implications. A child may not understand why other people are still sad or crying. Continue to help the child understand that people may continue to be sad for a longer period of time.

Preschool children do not understand euphemisms or abstract thoughts.

Use care when choosing which words you use to discuss death with your kids. Some children confuse death with sleep, particularly if they hear adults refer to death with phrases like: "they died in their sleep", "eternal rest", or "rest in peace." Other phrases like "grandpa went away" or "we lost grandma" can be equally confusing. These types of phrases create anxieties and fears because a young child does not understand the abstract thought. A child can become fearful of sleeping or worry that another family member will get lost.

Young children typically associate death with old age.

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. Reassure a child that you do expect that most people will live a long time.

A preschool child may worry that someone else will die.

Make sure you understand your child's questions. Children will often ask unexpected or unusual questions like: *When will you die?* This type of question from a child may be the child's attempt to talk about his fear that another person in his life will leave him. A child may also be worried that no one will be left to care for him. Knowing someone will still be available to care for you is an expected and practical concern, and a child needs reassurance to feel safe and secure. A loving adult could respond: *"Are you worried that I won't be here to take care of you? 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, Grandma, or Aunt Susie."*



Helping your child process grief

Start conversations gently. Don't avoid talking about death or grieving. Your child may find it easy to talk about death or may want to avoid the topic completely. Either way they need your help to understand and process grief. Use simple statements and open-ended questions such as: *"I'm sorry that [the person] has died"*, *"How do you feel about it?"* or *"What was [he or she] like?"*. Follow the child's lead. End the conversation whenever the child wants to stop. Don't force a conversation but just let your child know that you are available if they want to talk again.

Give ample reassurance. Children's grief is colored by fear. They fear abandonment. They fear that they too will die. They fear that they may have caused the death. When a parent has died, they fear the other parent will die also. Children need constant, loving reassurance that the surviving family will remain intact. Let your children know that they are safely in God's care no matter what circumstances they may encounter in life.

Stop, look, and listen. After a death, your child will need lots of undivided attention especially when feelings of grief and loss emerge. Encourage your child to express all of his emotions openly. Don't dismiss their concerns or judge them for what they tell you. Internalized grief can emerge months or years later to haunt and hurt the child. A child's feelings and concerns should take precedence over almost everything else. As soon as the child tries to share feelings, stop what you are doing immediately (or as soon as you can) and focus on the child.

Be a role model. Death and grief give you a unique opportunity to be a role model for children. Be emotionally genuine about your grief. Do not be afraid to talk about your own emotions of sadness or anger. Allow your children to see you express emotions and help them understand that even adults cry. Don't force them to express the same emotions but encourage them to express their feelings in ways that feel most comfortable to them. Model your faith during your grief as you pray and cling to God's word.

Emphasize God's love. Faith can be a great source of comfort to a child. Unfortunately, well meaning adults can confuse a child with statements like: *"It's all part of God's plan."* A child (even adults) often wonder: *"What plan? Is it part of God's plan to have my loved one die unexpectedly?"* Rather than speaking about God's will and plan with a child, emphasize God's love. Love is a concept that even the youngest child can understand. Children should be gently reminded, *"God loves you and wants to help you. You can talk to God about how you feel. You can tell him about your worries and fears. God will help you."*

By responding sensitively to children, you'll ensure they develop the coping skills they need to understand, manage, and respond to loss. Take time to help children cope with death, and make it possible for them to have a healthy bereavement.



Understanding How Children Grieve

Grief can affect how children express their feelings, relate to others, learn and process information, and behave. Everyone handles loss differently, and the same is true for children. Children may have a range of responses to the loss of a loved one, including one or more of the following:

- **Shock or detachment.** At times, children may seem like they are not upset. However, this can be a sign of shock. Distancing themselves from their feelings may be a way to ward off pain.
- **Regression.** Kids may act younger than their age or cling more to the surviving parent. For example, they may talk like a baby or go back to wetting the bed.
- **Acting out.** Kids who misbehave may be expressing anger. Acting out can help them feel in control of something at a time when they have no control over tragic events.
- **Lack of acceptance.** It can be hard for kids to believe or accept the loss. They might show this by asking the same questions repeatedly, or talking about the person who died like he or she might be coming back.
- **Feelings of guilt.** Younger children may worry that they caused a parent's death because they were once angry with them. Older children may feel survivor's guilt.
- **Sadness and depression.** Just like adults, children can feel down and struggle to feel positive about themselves or their surroundings.

In the short-term, these reactions to grief are common. If these feelings or behaviors don't go away over time, your child may be having more serious problems coping with death. Other signs that a child may have a more serious problem, such as depression, can include:

- Loss of interest in day-to-day activities and events
- Trouble sleeping
- Loss of appetite
- Fear of being alone
- Imitating the dead person to a great degree
- Talks about joining the dead person
- Staying away from friends
- Doing poorly at school or not wanting to go to school

If these signs are exhibited for any lengthy period, you should seek help from a psychological health professional.

["Helping Children Cope with Loss Resulting from War or Terrorism,"](#) [PDF 268KB] Mental Health America. *Last accessed March 28, 2014*

["Sesame Workshop Helps Children Cope with Grief,"](#) Real Warriors. *Last accessed March 6, 2014.*

["Facts for Families: Children and Grief,"](#) American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. *Last accessed March 28, 2014*



What about the funeral?

It may seem difficult to have a child around when you have to cope with your own grief, but it can help children to express their sorrow if they are together with family and friends. Younger children will often be overwhelmed by the intense emotions surrounding funerals while older children may need the closure that a funeral provides. You know your children the best. Watch their behavior or emotional responses and do what feels right for you and your children.

- **Prepare your child.** Tell your child what's going to happen at the funeral and visitation so they have some idea of what to expect. Include details about the service, the casket and explain about the dead person and his or her body. Also, prepare your child for the reactions and responses of others including family and friends. Try to keep explanations simple and honest.
- **Give them a choice.** Allow children to choose whether they attend a funeral. Some children are overwhelmed by funerals, while other find funerals an important part of the grieving process. A child should never be forced to attend a funeral.
- **Have an alternative celebration.** If the child doesn't want to go, then create a special time together with the child where they can have closure and celebrate the person who has died. Ideas include: releasing balloons with messages written on them, planting a tree, or having a private memorial service at home.
- **Provide support.** If your child attends the funeral, it's a good idea for a close adult to be with them to offer support and leave the service together if it gets too much.
- **Help them understand.** You may want to help your child separate the person they knew from the body being buried or cremated. Depending on the child's age, you could tell them that the person who died doesn't need their body any more. God's word is a good way to provide children with hope and assurance of God's love.

Should they see the body?

Viewing the body of a loved one is an important part of closure during the grieving process. Some children also find this helps them to say goodbye or see that the person is no longer suffering. Allow a child to choose if they want to do this, and prepare them for what to expect. If your child doesn't want to view the body, respect their wishes and help them find their own ways of saying goodbye.



Final thoughts on helping your child process death and loss

Maintain structure and routines:

Children receive great comfort and security from consistency and predictability. As quickly as possible, return their daily routines back to predictable and structured patterns.

Help a child remember:

Children often need tangible ways to respond to such an abstract concept as death. Help a child find ways to say good-bye and remember the loved one who has died. There are many ways of helping children celebrate the life of their loved one.

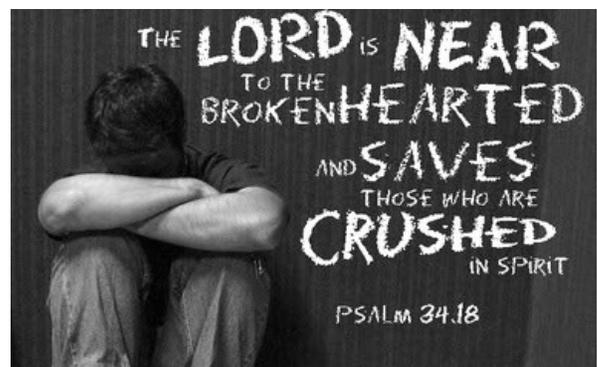
- Let them keep something that belonged to the person who died such as an item of clothing.
- Make a memory box where your child can keep all the special items that remind them of the person.
- Share happy stories about the person who has died.
- Look through old photographs or videos.
- The child may like to design a pillowcase in memory of the person. This pillowcase can help them feel closer to them at night.
- Make a scrapbook together about the person who has died. This scrapbook may encourage your child to open up about their thoughts and feelings.
- Start a journal of memories that can be added to by anyone at any time. This journal may help children who have lost someone at a young age to remember the person who has died as they grow up.

Admit that you don't know all the answers, and direct them to the One who does.

Keep in mind that you want your kids to ultimately rely on God, not you, to help them deal with challenges. So don't be afraid to let them know that you don't know the answers to all of their questions such as why someone died. Encourage them to take their questions to God in prayer. Find encouraging Scriptures that bring hope. Hang these Scriptures in their bedroom or around the house as a reminder of God's presence. As they work through their concerns with God, He will meet them where they are and help them discover more about how they can trust Him.



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Additional Resources:

Children's Books:

Balloons for Mary: A Children's Book about Grief and Coping with Death by Diane J. Ferris

Being Sad When Someone Dies: A Book about Grief . . . Just for Me! by Linus Mundy

Finding Grandpa Everywhere: A Young Child Discovers Memories of a Grandparent by John Hodge

God is Always Good: Comfort for Kids Facing Grief, Fear, or Change by Tama Fortner

Missing Mommy: A Book about Bereavement by Rebecca Cobb

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss by Michaelene Mundy

Saying Goodbye to Lulu by Corinne Demas

Someone I love Died by Christine Harder Tangvald

Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death by Bonnie Zucker

The Berenstain Bears Lose a Friend by Jan, Stan & Mike Berenstain

What Happened When Grandma Died? by Peggy Barker

What Happens when Someone Dies? A Child's Guide to Death and Funerals by Michaelene Mundy

What is Heaven Like? By Beverly Lewis

When a Pet Dies by Fred Rogers

When Bad Things Happen: A Guide to Help Kids Cope by Ted O'Neal

When Your Grandparent Dies: A Child's Guide to Good Grief by Victoria Ryan

Where Did They Go?: A Book to Help Children Understand a Little about Death, Heaven and Hell by Donna Childs

Why is Keiko Sick? A Conversation with Your Child about Why Bad Things Happen by Stacia McKeever

Books for Parents:

Choosing to See; A Journey of Struggle and Hope by Mary Beth Chapman

It's Okay to Cry: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Through the Losses of Life by H. Norman Wright

When a Child You Love is Grieving by Harold Ivan Smith