

Talking to children about death can be challenging for many adults. Earlier losses and earlier experiences with death – some even decades ago - can shape perspectives around death well into adulthood. As well, personal histories and cultural influences can impact how issues of death and dying are portrayed to children and young people. Here are some tips to help guide a discussion about death with children and young people:

1. **Act naturally.** This can be a very stressful and difficult topic to discuss. Try to act naturally when discussing death with the child. Be mindful of your tone and body language. Children read these cues; and if you seem tense and upset the child may internalize very negative associations with death and dying.
2. **Be direct and avoid euphemisms.** Use words and terms that are simple and accurate. Explain that the person has died. Saying “the illness/disease/accident made their body stop working” is a good way to begin. Adults sometimes use euphemisms because the dominant culture often encourages us to do so. Additionally, adults may have negative associations with direct language surrounding death. Euphemisms such as sleeping, passed away, resting, loss, etc. may make the acceptance of the death easier for adults to bear, but they can add to a child’s confusion about death.
3. **Follow the child’s lead.** After giving a simple explanation, allow the child to guide the conversation. Give them the chance to ask questions, and before answering, be sure that you understand what the child is asking.
4. **Be honest.** Sometimes the simplest, most honest response is difficult during an emotional time. Children need honesty to feel secure. Adults may strongly desire to answer all questions that a child asks about death and dying. It can be difficult to tell a child “I don’t know.” However, it can be empowering and reassuring for a child to hear this honest and vulnerable response; and it helps them to know that no one has all of the answers all of the time and that is it customary – even for adults - to feel confused about these questions and topics.
5. **The child may need help understanding what “dead” means.** When a person dies, they are not alive anymore. The body has stopped working and the person cannot talk, breathe, walk, move, eat, grow, go to the bathroom, or do any of the things that he/she could do when they were alive. The person does not return. Children may need to hear this explanation several times over; and they may ask the question repeatedly. This is not uncommon.
6. **Children’s understanding of death is developmental.** Children’s understanding of death develops according to their experience and age. A young child may think of death as temporary or reversible, rather than permanent and irreversible - a change in understanding that typically happens between the ages of 6-10. Images from cartoons or movies - as well as the use of euphemisms - may confuse a child’s perception of death as permanent
7. **Children generalize.** If the person died in a hospital, the child may assume that everyone who goes to the hospital dies. Similarly, if the person was sick before they died, the child may assume that whenever someone gets sick they die. It can be helpful to explain to children that sometimes the body gets so sick that even medical personnel can’t make it better, and that most people die after living a very long and healthy life.

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8. **Children may have feelings of guilt and responsibility.** Children at any age may have feelings of guilt or responsibility following a death. A child may believe that they directly or indirectly caused someone's death. A child may feel guilty about something they said or did (or did not say or do) months or even years prior to the person's death. This may make adults very uncomfortable, but it is important to allow the child to express these thoughts/feelings and to help them to understand the reality. Try not to immediately dismiss these feelings, but allow the child to explore them while gently re-assuring them that they are not responsible for the death.
9. **Share your own grief.** Appropriately share your own feelings with the child. Children learn by example, and they receive permission and acceptance to grieve themselves when they see an honest expression of emotions from adults.
10. **Reassure the child of their own safety and of the continued presence of loving and caring adults in their lives.** Death often brings about feelings of vulnerability, so the child may need reassurances of safety and security repeatedly. Depending on who has died and the child's relationship to the person, the child may want to know who will take care of them in the future.