

## Talking To Children About Death

(Taken from The Amelia Center and Children's of Alabama)

<https://www.childrensal.org/services/amelia-center>

If you are concerned about discussing death with your children, you're not alone. Many of us hesitate to talk about death, particularly with youngsters. But death is an inescapable fact of life. We must deal with it and so must our children; if we are to help them, we must let them know it's okay to talk about it.

By talking to our children about death, we may discover what they know and do not know - if they have misconceptions, fears, or worries. We can then help them by providing needed information, comfort, and understanding. Talk does not solve all problems, but without talk we are even more limited in our ability to help.

What we say about death to our children, or when we say it, will depend on their ages and experiences. It will also depend on our own experiences, beliefs, feelings, and the situations we find ourselves in, for each situation we face is somewhat different. Some discussions about death may be stimulated by a news report or a television program and take place in a relatively unemotional atmosphere; other talks may result from a family crisis and be charged with emotions.

### Children are Aware

Long before we realize it, children become aware of death. They see dead birds, insects, and animals lying by the road. They may see death at least once a day on television. They hear about it in fairy tales and act it out in their play. Death is a part of life, and children, at some level, are aware of it.

If we permit 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 interest in 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 comfortable with our own feelings - often easier said than done. Perhaps we can make it easier for ourselves and our children if we take a closer look at some of the problems that might make communication difficult.

### Communication Barriers

Many of us are inclined not to talk about things that upset us. We try to put a lid on our feelings and hope that saying nothing will be for the best. But not talking about something doesn't mean we aren't communicating. Children are great observers. They read messages on our faces and in the way we walk or hold our hands. We express ourselves by what we do, by what we say, and by what we do not say.

When we avoid talking about something that is obviously upsetting, children often hesitate to bring up the subject or ask questions about it. To a child, avoidance can be a message - "If Mummy and Daddy can't talk about it, it really must be bad, so I better not talk about it either." In effect, instead of protecting our children by avoiding talk, we sometimes cause them more worry and also keep them from telling us how they feel.

On the other hand, it also isn't wise to confront children with information that they may not yet understand or want to know. As with any sensitive subject, we must seek a delicate balance that encourages children to communicate - a balance that lies somewhere between avoidance and confrontation, a balance that isn't easy to achieve. It involves:

- trying to be sensitive to their desire to communicate when they're ready
- trying not to put up barriers that may inhibit their attempts to communicate
- offering them honest explanations when we are obviously upset
- listening to and accepting their feelings
- not putting off their questions by telling them they are too young
- trying to find brief and simple answers that are appropriate to their questions; answers that they can understand and that do not overwhelm them with too many words.
- Perhaps most difficult of all, it involves examining our own feelings and beliefs so that we can talk to them as naturally as possible when the opportunities arise.

## Not Having All the Answers

When talking with children, many of us feel uncomfortable if we don't have all the answers. Young children, in particular, seem to expect parents to be all knowing - even about death. But death, the one certainty in all life, is life's greatest uncertainty. Coming to terms with death can be a lifelong process. We may find different answers at different stages of our lives, or we may always feel a sense of uncertainty and fear. If we have unresolved fears and questions, we may wonder how to provide comforting answers for our children.

While not all our answers may be comforting, we can share what we truly believe. Where we have doubts, an honest, "I just don't know the answer to that one," may be more comforting than an explanation which we don't quite believe. Children usually sense our doubts. White lies, no matter how well intended, can create uneasiness and distrust. Besides, sooner, or later, our children will learn that we are not all knowing, and maybe we can make that discovery easier for them if we calmly and matter-of-factly tell them we don't have all the answers. Our non-defensive and accepting attitude may help them feel better about not knowing everything also.

It may help to tell our children that different people believe different things and that not everyone believes as we do, e.g., some people believe in an afterlife; some do not. By indicating our acceptance and respect for others' beliefs, we may make it easier for our children to choose beliefs different from our own but more comforting to them.

## The Challenge of Talking to a Young Child

Communicating with preschoolers or young school-age children about any subject can be challenging. They need brief and simple explanations. Long lectures or complicated responses to their questions will probably bore or confuse them and should be avoided. Using concrete and familiar examples may help. For instance, Dr. Earl A. Grollman suggests in his book, *Explaining Death to Children*, that death may be made more comprehensible 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 anymore; dead flowers do not grow or bloom any more.

A child may ask questions immediately or may respond with thoughtful silence and come back at a later time to ask more questions. Each question deserves a simple and relevant answer. Checking to see if a child has understood what has been said is critical; youngsters sometimes confuse what they hear. Also, children learn through repetition, and they may need to hear the same question answered over and over again. As time passes and children have new experiences, they will need further clarification and sharing of ideas and feelings.

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

There are also times when we have difficulty "hearing" what children are asking us. A question that may seem shockingly insensitive 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 finality of death is not fully understood, a child may realize 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 such 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 Mummy and Daddy did die, there are lots of people to take care of you. There's Aunt Ellen and Uncle John or Grandma."

Other problems can arise from children's misconceptions about death. Dr. R. Fulton, in Grollman's *Explaining Death to Children*, points out that some children confuse death with sleep, particularly if they hear adults refer to death with one of the many euphemisms for sleep - "eternal rest", "rest in peace." As a result of the confusion, a child may become

afraid of going to bed or of taking naps. Grandma went “to sleep” and hasn’t gotten up yet. Maybe I won’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.

Telling children that sickness was the cause of a death can also create problems, if the truth is not tempered with reassurance. Preschoolers cannot differentiate between temporary and fatal illness, and minor ailments may begin to cause them unnecessary concern. When talking to a child about someone who has died as a result of an illness, it might be helpful to explain that only a very serious illness may cause death, and that although we all get sick sometimes, we usually get better again.

Another generalization we often make unthinkingly is relating death to old age. Statements such as, “Only old people die” or, “Aunt Hannah died because she was old” can lead to distrust when a child eventually learns that young people die, too. It might be better to say something like, “Aunt Hannah lived a long time before she died. Most people live a long time, but some don’t. I expect you and I will.”

## **Characteristics of Age Groups**

**(to be used only as a general guide)**

### **Infants - 2 Years Old:**

Family is center of child’s world

Confident family will care for her needs

Plays grown-ups, imitates adults.

Functions on a day-to-day basis.

No understanding of time or death

Cannot imagine life without mom or dad

Picks up on nonverbal communication.

Thinks dead people continue to do things (eat, drink, go to the bathroom), but only in the sky.

Thinks if you walk on the grave the person feels it. Magical thinking : you wish it, it happens (bring the dead back or wishing someone was dead)

Death brings confusion, guilt [magically thought someone dead]

Tendency to connect things which are not related.

### **6-9 Years Old:**

Personifies death: A person, monster who takes you away

Sometimes a violent thing.

Still has magical thinking, yet begins to see death as final, but outside the realm of the child’s realistic mind.

Fails to accept that death will happen to them - or to anyone (although begins to suspect that it will).

Fears that death is something contagious.

Confusion of wording [soul/sole, dead body, live soul].

Develops an interest in the causes of death (violence, old age, sickness).