

## **A Parent's Guide to talking to children about death**



Talking to a child about death is bound to be challenging for any parent, but it can prepare children for grief and equip them with the tools to process complex emotions from an early age.

Being open and honest, and creating a safe space for discussion will also strengthen your bond with your child and encourage them to also be open and honest.

Talking about death early on will help to normalise it and make your child less fearful

or anxious of this inevitable part of life.

To help you navigate this difficult topic with your child, we have put together a parent's guide to talking to children about death.

### **Do it as soon as possible**

Start talking to your child about death as soon as possible.

The way you should approach the subject depends on their age and how much they will be able to comprehend, but the sooner you start discussing death with your child, the sooner they will begin to understand.

Infants are unlikely to be able to understand the concept of death, but they will sense how the people around them are feeling and if they are sad or angry.

Nursery children may be able to comprehend death but not the permanence of it. Many young children at this age think that it is reversible or temporary.

It is usually when children are in primary school that they begin to realise that death is permanent, but they still may not have experienced grief themselves.

By the time they are teenagers, children should have a full understanding of the impact, finality, and inevitability of death.

Helping your child to understand death as much as possible before it directly affects them will help them to process it and to grieve when someone they know does pass away.

### **Talk about death in nature**

One of the most common ways of introducing the concept of death to young children is to first talk about death in nature.

Start by talking to them about the life cycle of plants, and how all living things at some point stop living, including plants, animals, and people.

When you see a dead animal such as a bird, or a family pet dies, you should explain to your child that this animal is dead which means they are no longer living and that they will not be coming back.

Many young children squish bugs and pull wings off insects and do not understand they are killing them or fully comprehend what this means.

If your child does this or sees this happening, you may want to explain to them that by doing this they are ending the life of a living thing.

### **Watch or read about death**

Death plays a part in many books, tv shows, and films, even child-appropriate ones. Marie Curie has curated a list of books for and about grieving children which can help a child to understand death and realise they are not alone when someone dies.

The Lion King, Soul, Coco, Finding Nemo, all feature deaths or themes of dying that are child-appropriate, and watching them with your child can be a great way to spark a conversation about death.

Allow your children to read or watch these and encourage them to ask questions to better their understanding, but do not force them to talk about it if they are uncomfortable or get upset.

### **Be clear, direct, and honest**

When telling a child about something or someone they know dying, do not use euphemisms such as “they are in a better place”, “they have gone away”, “they have gone to sleep”, or “we have lost them”.

Phrases like this can make them believe that someone that has died can come back, cause them to fantasise about dying, or leave them puzzled or confused.

You should talk to children about death in a place that is familiar and where they feel safe. Once they are comfortably playing or relaxing, tell them what has happened and be direct.

Although it may sound cold, the best thing to do is to say “X has died. This means that they are no longer living, their body has stopped working, and you will not be able to see them again.”

They could have a lot of questions, or they may not say anything at all. Be patient with them, answer any questions that they have honestly, and check their understanding.

Do not be alarmed if your child is silent and does not cry or seem to care that you are visibly upset. It can be difficult for young children to fully grasp the concept of death.

Nothing can fully prepare you or your child for the death of a loved one.

The best thing you can do when that happens is be there for your child, allow them to grieve and to ask questions, but also make sure you allow yourself time to grieve and process what has happened.

### **Seek professional help**

You should expect to see some changes in your child's mood or behaviour following the death of a loved one, and this is completely normal.

However, if there are extreme or persistent changes, you may need to seek professional help.

Child Bereavement UK supports children and young people who are facing bereavement. For confidential support, information, and guidance, speak to a Child Bereavement UK professional by calling their helpline on 0800 02 888 40.