



TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT A DEATH

It is important to tell a child of any age when someone important in their lives has died, and ideally, this should be done by someone who is closest to them. The following information is from Child Bereavement UK and is based on what families tell them was helpful for them. We thought this might be helpful if you or someone you know, has to break the news of a death.

- Tell a child as soon as possible, in a place where they can be supported and away from distractions.
- Use clear language that they can understand, for example: "I have something very sad to tell you. Grandad has been very ill for some time, and now he has died." Clear words such as 'he has died' are easier for children to understand than 'lost' 'passed away' or 'gone to the stars'.
- Allow for time together for comfort, support and any questions they may ask. Answer questions honestly, but keep explanations short, clear and appropriate for their age and understanding.
- It is OK to say you don't know the answer to a question, but that you will come back to them if you find an answer. Especially with a young child, you may need to repeat the information. See 'Explaining what death means to young children' below.

It is OK to show your emotions and to explain that you are sad because the person has died, and that it is OK to be sad sometimes and happy sometimes when someone dies.

Explaining what death means to young children

Children under the age of six do not usually understand that death is permanent and so may expect the person to come back. It is still important to tell them that the person has died.

An explanation that helps young children to understand what death means might be something like:

"When someone dies, their body stops working, and this means that they don't need anything to eat or to drink and they can't feel anything. Because their body has stopped working, they can't come back to life, even though we may really want them to." You could use visual examples from the natural world to help explain, such as comparing a dead leaf on the ground and a living leaf on the tree.

How might they react?

Children and young people tend to show feelings with behaviours rather than words, and they absorb and process information in different ways at different ages. They might show distress or anger, ask questions or seem not to react at all at first. Not reacting at first does not mean they don't care or haven't heard you. They may suddenly come back with a reaction or question later.

Common reactions include feeling anxious or insecure, being angry, confusion about the death and why it has happened, feeling protective of others, reduced self-confidence, and wondering if they were somehow responsible for what happened. There is no magic formula but things that help include:

Clear, honest and age-appropriate information, and answering their questions.
Reassurance that they are not to blame and that different feelings are OK.
Normal routines and a clear demonstration that important adults are there for them.
Time to talk about what has happened, ask questions and build memories.
Showing your emotions, which will help them to express theirs.

Seeing the person who has died?

Children (and adults) may want to see the person who has died. Making a decision about this may not be easy and you can be guided by what feels right for your family in the circumstances. However, as long as children are well prepared for what they will see, and they do not feel pressurised to see the person, bereaved children have told us that seeing the person is helpful and not something they regret doing. It can help them to understand what has happened, and to say goodbye.

It is important to allow a child to change their mind at the last minute. They could stay outside the room at the funeral directors, or look in through the door. Other options include asking a child if they would like to do something special for the person like a note or picture, which can be placed with the person, either before or during the funeral.

Funerals

It is helpful to explain to children what a funeral is and why we have them, first explaining what death means to young children if necessary (see above). A very young child or even a baby can go to a funeral with the rest of the family. Although they may not understand what is happening at the time, when they are older they will appreciate that they were a part of this important event along with everyone else. Or they could just attend the gathering after. Older children can be given the choice to attend. As long as a child is prepared for what is going to happen and what they will see, attending the funeral can be a helpful experience. Involving children in the funeral planning in small ways can help them feel part of the event, even if they do not attend. They could make a drawing or card which could be placed on the coffin, or they might have a favourite poem or a song they would like to be included. If possible, take the children beforehand to the funeral location, for a quick look. This can help them feel secure and better prepared for the event.

Useful organisation

Child Bereavement UK

There is a wealth of information Child Bereavement UK's website including how to help yourself and your children through grief, other people's stories and some additional reading and resources. There is also a list of useful organisations who may be able to help in your area.

www.childbereavementuk.org

National helpline: 0800 02 888 40

Winston's Wish

Winston's Wish provides support for bereaved children and young people up to the age of 18. They also support their parents and carers.

www.winstonswish.org

Helpline telephone number: 08452 03 04 05

Grief Encounter

Grief Encounter offers a flexible and accessible service, which aims to professionally care and respond to bereaved children, young people and their families via counselling, group activities, family fun days, residential camps and interactive online services.

www.griefencounter.org.uk

Tel no: 0208 371 8455

Hope Again

Hope Again is the youth website of Cruse Bereavement Care. It is a safe place, where young people who are facing grief can share their stories with others.

www.hopeagain.org.uk

Freephone number: 0808 808 1677

Source: childbereavementuk.org