

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE: GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

The impending death of a loved one is challenging and stressful for any child. Many parents struggle with the instinct to protect their children from reality, fearing that discussing death will be distressing or cause harm. Additionally, parents and caregivers are often unsure about how to engage children in sensitive discussions about this topic. Key questions often arise: How much information should I share with my child? When is the right time to have these conversations? Will my child understand what is happening? Despite the challenging nature of discussing death with children, open communication can be crucial for a child's emotional well-being.

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COMMUNICATION

Communicating openly about death is essential for children facing the loss of a loved one. It is important to understand what this means for children at different ages and situations. It helps them understand the nature of the death, provides a foundation of emotional support, strengthens family connections, and lays the groundwork for healthy grieving. Silence and avoidance of the topic can be detrimental to children's well-being.

Timing of Discussions About Illness and Anticipated

Death: For each conversation, try to find a quiet and comfortable space where you can talk without distractions. Conversations with children about death should be based on their developmental level, the expected course of illness, the child's exposure (i.e., what they have seen and heard about the illness), what they are going to be faced with in the near future, and the specific questions they ask. Adolescents are likely to benefit from discussions about medical diagnosis and health status earlier in the course of the illness than younger children, as well as regular updates as the illness progresses. In contrast, conversations with younger children might occur closer to the anticipated death and be framed to address specific questions and concerns expressed by the child. Children of all ages may

benefit from follow-up conversations to answer new questions and concerns that arise as their understanding evolves.

Be Honest and Use Direct Language:

It is important to determine the information a child is capable of understanding and what will be helpful to them based on their developmental level. Information shared during each conversation should be framed to help the child understand what they see and hear, as well as what they are likely to experience. Regardless of the level of information shared, answer questions truthfully and never share untrue information to a child in an attempt to reassure them. Use concrete language (e.g., Bill is going to die, his body can't work any more and it can't be fixed), and avoid euphemisms (e.g., Grandma is going to go to sleep). Some children may be comforted with words that reflect their family's culture or religious beliefs (e.g., Sarah is going to heaven to be with Grandma).

CHILD-CENTERED APPROACH

It is essential to discuss the impending death using a child-centered approach that prioritizes their developmental stage, unique needs, and emotional well-being.

Provide Age-Appropriate Information: Your child's age and developmental level determines what they understand about what it means to die. Tailor your communication to your child's age using the guidelines below.

- *Infants and Toddlers (0-2 years):* Are likely too young to understand what death is. Respond to their emotional cues and provide comfort through physical touch and soothing words.
- *Preschoolers (2-5 years):* Typically do not fully understand the permanence of death. Preschoolers may view death as temporary or reversible. It may be helpful to relate death to familiar experiences, like a wilted flower or a pet that has died.

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- **School-aged Children (5-8 years):** Begin to understand death as irreversible. Some may feel responsible for the death. Use concrete language (i.e., dies, heart stops beating, body stops working) to discuss the death and to answer their questions (e.g., “Are you going to die too, Mommy?”). Keep the conversation simple, while allowing their questions to guide you.
- **Preadolescence (8-12 years):** Can understand more abstract concepts related to death, such as causality and the afterlife. Remind them that they are going to be taken care of since they may grapple with the emotional and philosophical implications of death.
- **Teenagers (13-18 years):** Can understand the complexities of death and may have more philosophical questions. Provide realistic information about how the illness will progress, what death will look like, and when it might happen to address fears about the future.

Identify Individual Needs: Children will respond and grieve differently based on their age, their temperament, and their relationship with the loved one who is dying. Be patient and understanding of their unique emotional responses and coping mechanisms. The closer the child’s relationship with the loved one, the more impactful the loss will likely be.

Acknowledge Feelings: Validate the full range of your child’s emotions, including sadness, anger, fear, confusion, and even relief and joy, recognizing that children’s reactions are likely to change over time. It can be helpful for you to talk about your own feelings about the death (e.g., I feel really sad about Daddy dying. I miss him very much), modeling how to manage difficult emotions for your child, just ensuring you don’t overwhelm him/her. Sharing memories, creating a scrapbook, or engaging in other meaningful activities can help children process their grief and maintain a sense of connection with their loved one both during the course of illness and after death.

Address Fears: Reassure children of your love and commitment to their well-being. Emphasize they are not alone and you will be there to support them.

SITUATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Foster a supportive environment within the context of end of life care, ensuring the child is supported in a manner that is most helpful to them.

Maintain Contact: Avoid isolating the child from the family. Allow as much safe contact with the dying loved one as possible. While you may instinctively want to shield your children from the realities of terminal illness, doing so can hinder their adjustment.

Maintain routines: Whether the loved one is receiving care at home, in a hospital, or in a hospice setting, maintain familiar routines to provide a sense of stability.

Maintain self-care and support systems: Taking care of your own emotional well-being will allow you to better support your child. When possible, lean on your support network of family and friends for emotional and practical assistance. If additional support is needed, consider seeking professional assistance from someone you trust, such as your religious leader (e.g., chaplain, rabbi), your primary care provider, a mental health professional, or a grief counselor.

Monitor children’s emotional responses: All children are likely to have a range of emotions in response to the death of a loved one, including sadness, fear, and anger among others. These emotions are likely to change over time. Consider seeking professional help if your child appears to be struggling with their emotional responses, or if they exhibit persistent symptoms of depression or anxiety, or experience suicidal thoughts.

Additional Resources

Additional resources regarding how to prepare a child for an impending death are available at the sites below.

- **The National Grief Center for Children and Families**
<https://www.dougy.org/grief-support-resources>
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network**
https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//helping_young_children_with_traumatic_grief_caregivers.pdf
- **Child Mind Institute -**
<https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/>



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
Department of Psychiatry
Uniformed Services University
4301 Jones Bridge Road, Bethesda, MD 20814-4799
www.CSTSONline.org