

Explaining to young children that someone has died

Talking to a young child about death and dying is incredibly difficult and can feel just too hard to do. This is compounded by an adult's natural instinct to protect children from the tough things in life. In order to make some sense of what has happened, children need information and explanations. These need to be honest, simple, and in language the child understands.

With support, children can deal with the truth, no matter how difficult or traumatic; what they find hard are the untruths. When circumstances surrounding the death are particularly distressing, it may be tempting to withhold information, but, even in those instances, the same principles apply. The following are suggestions to help you with what to say, how much to say, when and how to say it. The words suggested are not meant to be a script. They are ideas to give you the confidence to go with what feels right for you and the child or children you are with.

When is it best to tell them that someone has died and where should it be done?

- It may go against adults' protective instincts, but children need to hear the news as soon as possible. The longer you leave it, the greater the likelihood that they will overhear a conversation or find out in some other inappropriate way. Children are very sensitive to atmosphere and will already know that something serious has happened, but may be unsure as to exactly what.
- The news is best heard from a member of the family, but this can be a very hard thing to do. If you feel unable to do this, try to stay in close proximity while someone else familiar to the child explains what has happened.
- If you are breaking the news yourself, have someone else around to support you.
- If possible, find somewhere where you will not be disturbed.
- Try to be physically close to the child or have some sort of physical contact such as holding a hand. Sitting on a settee is ideal. For a child who finds physical contact uncomfortable, just sit nearby.

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Version: 05 Reviewed: July 2018
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When talking to a child of any age, the following principles apply, regardless of the circumstances

Use simple words appropriate for the child's age and understanding. It is important to use the real words such as 'dead' and 'died'. Euphemisms including 'lost' or 'gone to sleep' may seem kinder, but for a child can cause confusion.

Only give as much information as a child wants. This is usually indicated by them asking a question – if they have asked the question it usually means that they are ready to hear, or need to hear, the answer.

Try to answer only the question asked and avoid giving extra detail. There is a fine line between being honest and overloading a child with information they do not want. Information can always be added later if needed.

If faced with a question you find difficult or are not sure how to answer, it can be helpful to ask the child what they think. This will give you an indication of how much the child already knows and understands.

How to tell a young child that someone has died

- Alert the child to the fact that you have something sad to say:
'I have some very sad news to tell you...'
- Often initially all you need to say is that the person has died; more questions will follow when the child is ready for further explanation and information.
- If a person has been unwell, it can be helpful to build on what the child already knows:
'You know last time we saw granny and she was very unwell...'
- Reassure the child that it is OK to ask questions about anything at all and that you will do your best to answer them honestly.

Explaining what *dead* means to young children

The following are suggestions for words you could use when explaining to a young child the concept of being dead. Exactly what you choose to say will depend on individual circumstances and your own beliefs. A good approach is honesty combined with lots of reassurance. Concentrate on what feels right for you and the children that you are with.

'When somebody dies their body stops working. A dead body does not breathe because their lungs are no longer working and the heart has stopped. A dead body cannot move, it will be very quiet and still. A dead body cannot feel anything so there will be no pain.'

Because a young child can find it hard to grasp the difference between being dead and being alive, they may need to be reassured with words along the lines of the following:

'Because their body has stopped working, dead people do not need anything to eat or to drink and they cannot feel the cold. Dead people stay dead for ever; much as we might like them to, they cannot come back to life.'

On hearing the news, a child's reactions may vary from extreme distress to looking blank as if nothing has happened, or even giggling nervously – all are normal.

If you are unsure about some aspect, be honest about what you do not know and say that, when you do find out, you will tell the child.

You are likely to have to repeat this information and answer questions in subsequent days and weeks. Being asked the same questions over and over again can be extremely hard but this is the way that young children try to make sense of what has happened.

Suggestions for books that might help you talk to a young child

Available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated.

Further resource references are available from Child Bereavement UK.

Someone I know Has Died

Trish Phillips

This activity book is designed to be used, with adult help, by very young children who need assistance to understand what being dead means, what we do, and how we might feel when someone dies. Some pages are interactive in ways familiar to children.

Never Too Young to Grieve: Supporting Children Under 5 After the Death of a Parent

A booklet designed for parents/carers and professionals supporting under children under the age of 5.

Available from Winston's Wish

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Talking about Death:

A Dialogue Between Parent and Child

Earl Grollman

A guide for adults and Primary School age children to read together which helps with words and explanations for some of the questions that children might ask.

Someone Very Important Has Just Died

Mary Turner

A simple, short booklet with words to help you explain death, burials, cremations and what happens at a funeral.

Further resources and/or references are available from Child Bereavement UK, upon request.