

# Talking to children and youth about death



Talking about death is best approached with honesty, sensitivity, and support.

This resource is meant to help you navigate these types of conversations with children and youth.

## This packet includes information on the following topics:

- Tips for Talking to your Child about Death
- Grief reactions
- Conversation Starters and Online Grief Resources



This document was written in collaboration with CHEO Child Life Specialists



# Use Clear Language

**It's best to use clear and direct language with children.**

Use the words “died” and “dead” rather than “passed away” or “lost.” These terms can lead to confusion, especially in younger children who may wonder if they can go and find someone who is “lost.”

Being open, honest, and direct helps children understand what has happened. In the absence of clear information, children tend to “fill in the gaps” themselves, which can lead to misunderstandings or fears that may be worse than the reality.

Death is a difficult topic to discuss, especially with children. The way a child understands, and processes death depends on their developmental stage.

## Examples

“[Person] has died. Their body stopped working and cannot start again”

"Their body cannot see, smell, think or feel anymore"





## Talking to children and youth about death

### Share information slowly

You don't need to give children all of the information in one go. It's best to give them manageable pieces of information and build upon them as needed.

Let children ask questions and provide truthful answers. Reassure them that they can ask more questions in the future.

Children might need to hear multiple times that the person is not coming back. Providing space to talk about the person who has died can help them understand the finality of death.



### Reactions to expect

Children express grief differently from adults. Young children tend to “jump” in and out of their grief. One moment they may be distressed, and the next, they may ask to play. This is typical and allows them to process emotions in manageable pieces.

Some children experience guilt. They may believe they somehow contributed to the death or feel guilty for being alive. Reassurance is crucial in helping them understand that the death was not their fault.

Some children instinctively try to protect their grieving adults by hiding their own feelings. Reassuring them that it is safe to talk and express their emotions can help them navigate their grief.





# Helping Children explore their Emotions

Children look to adults for guidance on how to process grief. It is okay for children to see you cry, as this models' healthy emotional expression. However, more extreme grief reactions may be overwhelming for them.

Encouraging conversations about emotions can help children express their own feelings. This shows them that their emotions are valid and that it is okay to express grief.

**“I know you may have questions about how they died.  
What would be helpful to know right now?”**

**“I’m crying because I feel really sad that [person] died, and  
I really miss them.”**





## Talking to children and youth about death

| Age Group                      | Understanding of Death                                         | How to Explain                                                                                          | Signs of Grief                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Infants & Toddlers (0–2 years) | Do not comprehend death but sense emotional changes.           | Maintain routines, offer comfort, use simple language “[Person] is not here anymore, but you are safe.” | Clinginess, changes in sleep/eating, irritability.                                                                                             |
| Preschool (3–5 years)          | May see death as temporary or reversible.                      | Use clear language, explain simply: “[Person] has died, their body has stopped working.”                | Regression (bedwetting, thumb-sucking), confusion, magical thinking (e.g., thinking they caused the death or that the person might come back). |
| Early Elementary (6–9 years)   | Beginning to grasp that death is permanent.                    | Answer questions directly, reassure them it’s not their fault, encourage expressions of grief.          | Withdrawal, increased fears (e.g., fear of losing others), trouble focusing.                                                                   |
| Preteens (10–12 years)         | Recognize death is final and may struggle with emotions.       | Encourage open conversations, validate feelings, be patient with mood swings.                           | Anxiety, sadness, acting out, difficulty concentrating.                                                                                        |
| Teenagers (13–18 years)        | Have an adult-like understanding but may struggle emotionally. | Be open, let them express feelings in their own way, encourage discussions.                             | Risk-taking, isolation, anger, questioning beliefs, difficulty focusing.                                                                       |

## General tips for all ages

- Be honest and use clear language
- Reassure the child that they are loved and safe
- Provide physical comfort
- Allow them to express their feelings without judgement
- Maintain routines for stability at home and socially with their friends
- Express your own emotions, within reason, freely around the child or youth
- Be patient as grief is not a linear process
- Offer opportunities for emotional and creative expression (e.g., using art, toys, play)
- Seek professional support, if needed



# Tips for talking to children and youth

## Be honest

Being open, honest, and direct helps children understand what has happened and avoids complicating their grief process

## Use age-appropriate language

Use simple concrete language while speaking to your child and explain the circumstances surrounding the person's death.

## Avoid euphemisms

Use the terms "death, dead, and/or dying". Phrases such as "passed away" or "not with us anymore" can be confusing for a child.

## Repetition may be necessary

As children process their thoughts and feelings about loss, they may need to revisit the topic of death multiple times. This is normal and a sign of active grieving.

## Seek out and use available resources

Reach out to professionals and community organizations for support. Go at your own pace, you may not need services and resources right away, but they are always available to you.

## Create a safe space for all emotions

It is important for the grieving child to understand that they are safe and that their emotions and thoughts will be validated and respected.

## Model healthy grieving

While you may feel the urge to hide your emotions, allowing a child to see healthy grieving can help them feel safe enough to express their own grief.

## Go at your child's pace

It's best to give children manageable pieces of information and build upon them as needed. Allow your child time to process the information you have provided.



## Talking to children and youth about death

### Conversation Starters

“When someone dies, their body stops working. They no longer breathe, move, eat, or drink. They cannot feel anything when they're dead, so it does not hurt and they're not in pain.”

“When someone you love dies it is normal to have big feelings and questions. Who are the people you feel comfortable talking to?”

“When someone you love dies, it may be important for you to say goodbye to them. How would you like to say goodbye to \_\_\_\_\_?”

“After someone you love dies, it can be helpful to remember good memories of that person. Some people use photos, or keep something that belonged to the person they love. What would you like to use to help you remember \_\_\_\_\_?”

“The people we love play a big part in our lives. After a person dies, many things may change? What changes do you think will come now that \_\_\_\_\_ is dead?”

Visit [Roger Neilson Children's Hospice Resources](https://RogerNeilsonChildrensHospice.ca) page for online grief resources and tools

