



## Guidelines for Talking with Your Child about Death

- If you have any control over the time and setting of such discussions, try to time them not near bedtime and to locate them in a quiet, private place.
- Tell your child the truth and use the word “died” as opposed to common euphemisms such as “passed away”.
- Tell your child what happened using age-appropriate language. The younger the child, the more concrete you should be.
- Give your child time to absorb what you are saying and opportunities to react and ask questions. Correct any misunderstandings; if you don’t know the answer to a question, say so – and that you will try to find out.
- Model and encourage the expression of feelings. Validate the feelings, whatever they are. There is no right way to feel.
- Respect your child’s reactions and needs.
- Provide reassurance about care and safety.

### How Children Understand Death

#### 3-5 year olds

- View death as reversible, temporary, and impersonal
- Often equate death with sleeping
- May think the dead person still eats, breathes, exists
- May worry that the dead feel smothered, cold, hungry
- Are vulnerable to confusion
- Think magically
- Are egocentric

#### 5-9 year olds

- Are beginning to understand that death is final and irreversible
- Understand that the dead do not feel pain or suffer
- View life and death as opposites
- May still engage in magical thinking (e.g., ways to ward off death)

#### 10 year olds through adolescence

- Understand that death is universal and inevitable
- May be intrigued with the meaning of life and death and with romanticized death in literature
- May need to challenge and defy death by engaging in risk-taking behaviors

## Helping Children Cope with Grief

- Keep in mind that young children grieve at a pace that is intermittent, often in short spurts, layered with normal behavior. Do not pass judgment on the child for his/her capacity to engage in play soon after learning about a death.
- Children will be influenced by the behavior of the adults surrounding them; therefore, surrounding adults should model that strong feelings can be expressed in safe ways.
- Children who are grieving may display a broad range of expression and should be permitted to do so.
- Give the child outlets for expressing his/her grief – e.g., art, acting, writing, physical activity, hammering, punching bag.
- Clarify that the death is NOT the result of the child's action or thoughts.
- Give the child opportunities to express condolences in an age-appropriate way (sending a handmade card, baking cookies for the family, going to the funeral or shiva).
- Help the child to preserve memories of the person and to do something meaningful in the person's honor.

## Just a Few Suggestions About Relevant Books

S. Alexander, *Nadia the Willful* (1983).

L.K. Brown and M. Brown, *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* (1996).

Gootman, Marilyn, *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing* (2005).

E. Jackson, *Sometimes Bad Things Happen* (2002).

B. Mellonie and R. Ingpen, *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* (1983).

M. Portnoy, *Where Do People Go When They Die?* (2004).

T. Romain, *What On Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?* (1999).

Thomas, Pat, *I Miss You: A First Look at Death* (2001).

J. Viorst, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* (1971).

E. B. White, *Charlotte's Web* (1952).

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