

# Supporting children and young people when someone dies

Practical and emotional help



**Marie  
Curie**

Care and support  
through terminal illness

# How do I tell a child someone has died?

Having conversations about death with a child can be difficult. You might be worried about how much they will understand or how they will react. But speaking honestly can help them to feel supported.

## Talking about death

Here are some things which may be helpful when talking about death. You can use these when telling the child that someone has died, or in later conversations about the person's death.

### Be honest

Children need to know what happened to the person that died. Try to explain in clear, simple language that's right for their age and level of experience. You can also try giving them information in small amounts at a time, especially with young children, as this can help them understand. It's helpful to spend some time speaking about what you've told them, to check they've understood what you said. Once you've explained that someone has died, the details can follow.

### Use plain language

It is clearer to say someone has died than to use euphemisms. Avoid explanations such as the person has 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away'. They may be confusing for the child, or might make them frightened to go to sleep or worry when you leave the house that you might not come back.

### Encourage questions

Be prepared for the child to be curious and to ask the same questions again and again. This can be distressing, but it's a part

of their need for reassurance and can help them process the information.

## **Reassure them**

It's common for children to worry that the person has died as a result of something they may have said or done. Explain simply how and why they're not to blame. It might be helpful to give an example, like saying the person died because their heart stopped working. Reassure them that nothing that anyone said or did caused this to happen.

## **Ask them to tell their story**

To protect children, adults sometimes try to avoid talking about the person who's died. But the child may want to talk about the person. They may need to tell their story. They had a relationship with the person who died and that relationship was important to them.

Listening to them can help you understand what they know about what happened. You can also explain anything they've misunderstood. Listening will also help you understand how the child's feeling. Avoid telling them what you think they should feel. Let them know that the feelings they may be having are OK, including ones that they may feel bad about, such as relief that the person has died.

## **Ask for help**

When you're helping a bereaved child, take things one day at a time. If at any time you feel unable to cope, remember that you don't have to go it alone. Friends, family, healthcare professionals, teachers at the child's school and others can all help. There are child bereavement services that you can use (see page 44), and there is information on looking after yourself on page 38.

You may be able to get support through a local hospice, including Marie Curie Hospices. Some have counsellors and other professionals who can support children and young people. This is usually only available if the person who died was known to the hospice, but it can vary. You can find out if there is a hospice near you on the Hospice UK website, [hospiceuk.org](https://www.hospiceuk.org)

Child Bereavement UK (see page 44) also has useful information for explaining death to children.

## Tips on talking about death

Here are some tips that may help you talk about death:

- When they ask a question, you could start by asking: “What do you think?” Then you can build your answer on their understanding of what’s happened.
- Try to avoid telling the child not to worry or be sad. It’s normal that they should get attached to people. And, like adults, they might find it hard to control their feelings. You might find that the child doesn’t seem to be sad. Sometimes they need time to absorb what’s happened.
- Don’t try to hide your pain, either – it’s alright to cry in front of the child. It can help to let them know why you’re crying. You might want to say to them that people cry for many reasons, and sometimes they cry to express their pain or sadness when someone close to them dies. Let them know that it’s also OK not to cry, if that’s how they feel.
- Be sure to give the child plenty of reassurance. Let them know they’re loved and that there are still people who will be there for them. A cuddle can make a big difference and make them feel cared for.

## Can talking about death help a child?

Adults often want to protect children by not telling them what's going on. But children may notice that something's wrong and might feel anxious and confused if they aren't told the person has died. They might prefer to know, even if it's sad, rather than trying to cope with not knowing.

Talking to a child about death can help them feel better supported and more secure. They may have fears or questions that they're worried about bringing up. Talking about death might make them feel more comfortable to ask these questions, and they might feel more able to talk about their feelings. If they see adults showing their feelings, they may feel more willing to open up about their own.

If they're not told about the person's death, they may start to make up their own explanation of why the person isn't around anymore. Not knowing the cause of the person's death might make them feel guilty that they somehow caused it. They may also start to worry that they could 'catch' the illness, if they don't have enough information about it.

## Worries you might have

You may be worried about talking to a child about someone close to them who has died. You may worry that you will frighten them or say the wrong thing.

You may be struggling with your own feelings, and find it difficult to support the child. Or, you might feel like you want to protect them by not telling them.

Try to be kind to yourself if you do feel this way – it is normal to find conversations like these difficult. There are some things you can try on page 8 which could help you with the conversation. You can also get support with the conversation from other people (see page 7).

Talking about death was difficult, it's not anything I've really had to do before. Our family were very open with her and I think it was the right thing. I took my cue from them. I was very aware of being sensitive and not telling her stuff she didn't need to know.

Gemma, who helped her 10-year-old cousin when her grandfather died.

## How does grief affect children?

Children, more than adults, swing quickly between grieving and getting on with their normal lives. They can be upset one minute and asking to play football or have some ice cream the next. It can be so quick that it's sometimes called 'puddle jumping' – the puddle is their feelings of grief, and they move quickly in and out of the puddle.

When you tell them the person's died, they might not react very much. You may even wonder if they've understood. It may take a while to process the news and they may not have the words to express their feelings. You can say you know it's a huge piece of news and you're ready to talk whenever they like.

A child's understanding will depend on many things, including their age, stage of development, family background, personality and previous experience of death. Children don't develop at the same rate – they're all individuals. Two children from the same family of the same age may react very differently to a death. You know the individual child best and will be able to adapt what you say to suit them. Be led by what they want to know and don't be afraid to tell them if you don't know the answer to something.

They may come back to the subject and ask you the same questions several times. Or they may try not to talk about the person if they think it upsets you. You can reassure them that it's OK to talk and much better than keeping their worries to themselves.

Young children often have 'magical thinking', where they believe their own thoughts can influence events. They might think that something they did, like being naughty, caused the person's death. They may want a friend or family member to come back and find it difficult to think it might not happen.

Our granddaughter was only three when my husband died. He helped look after her and they were very close. She's older now but she still sometimes gets upset remembering him.

Jennie, family member

# How children understand and react to death

Age	Understanding of death	Common reactions
Birth to six months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No understanding of death, but will notice if their main caregiver (eg mum or dad) is absent.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feeding and sleeping difficulties, crying, worried.</li></ul>
Six months to two years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No understanding of death, but will be very upset if their main caregiver is absent.</li><li>• At two, children start to notice the absence of other people, eg a familiar grandparent.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loud crying, inconsolable.</li><li>• Angry about changes to their daily routine.</li><li>• Sleep problems and tummy aches.</li><li>• Looking for the person and asking where they are.</li></ul>
Two to five years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May talk about death but don't understand it and think that it's reversible. May ask questions, such as: 'if grandma's in the ground, how does she breathe?'</li><li>• Believe in 'magical thinking' and may think they are directly responsible for the death.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask the same questions repeatedly.</li><li>• Need reassurance that you're not going to die too, and that death is not their fault.</li><li>• Clingy behaviour and behaving inappropriately for their age.</li></ul>



Age	Understanding of death	Common reactions
<p><b>Five to ten years</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At age seven, most children understand that death is permanent and inevitable. Some may take longer than this.</li> <li>• As they're aware of death, they may worry that you or others may die too.</li> <li>• They may be fascinated by what happens when someone dies.</li> <li>• They can show compassion for someone who's bereaved.</li> <li>• They may worry about the effect on you if they're sad and try to hide their feelings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness.</li> <li>• Getting angry more often, difficulty concentrating at school.</li> <li>• Regressive behaviour.</li> <li>• Trying to be brave and control things.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Adolescents</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They normally have a better understanding of death and can think about the long-term impact it will have on their lives.</li> <li>• They may worry more about changes to the routine, like who will take care of them or look after the house. They might worry about things like finances or the future.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding it difficult to talk about their feelings or wanting to talk to friends rather than adults.</li> <li>• Feeling sadness, anger or guilt. Their emotions may be quite intense.</li> <li>• Feeling worse about themselves.</li> <li>• Wishing it hadn't happened, or wondering why it had to happen to them.</li> <li>• Changes in how well they do at school or work.</li> <li>• Worrying they might develop the illness which the person died of (especially if they were related).</li> </ul>

Since Erin died, it's difficult – at first, Amelia didn't really question anything, but since she started preschool, she does question why other children have a mummy and she doesn't.

Chris, whose wife had a terminal illness

## Questions about funerals

If the child is going to the funeral, talk to them about it beforehand, especially if they've never been to one before. This will give them an idea of what to expect. Be aware of how you explain cremation to children as they can find the idea of fire quite frightening.

For more suggestions, see Child Bereavement UK's information about explaining funerals, burials and cremation to children, which can be found on its website (see page 44).

### What is a funeral?

Funerals are special ceremonies which give the family and friends of the person who died a chance to come together to remember them, to say goodbye and to think about their life. A funeral may be at a religious building such as a chapel, church, temple, synagogue or mosque. Sometimes they're at a place called a crematorium. Although they think about someone's life, funerals can be very sad.

### What happens at a funeral?

The body of the person who died is usually put in a special box called a coffin. Music is often played and people usually speak about the person who died. The body of the person who died may be buried in the ground. Sometimes instead of being buried people are cremated. This is when the body is turned into soft ashes.

Before the funeral, Clodagh was asking me, where is grandad, what happens at a funeral? She didn't know what it was. I said it's OK if you get upset, you can cry, everyone is there for you. There were questions which you think, of course she doesn't know this! Why would she?

Gemma, who helped her 10-year-old cousin when her grandfather died

### **What do people wear to funerals?**

People sometimes wear black or dark clothes to go to a funeral. However, some people don't like to do this. And sometimes the person who died may have said what they wanted people to wear. In different cultures, different colours can be worn.

### **Why do people dress up?**

Sometimes people dress up because it's an important event.

### **How long does the funeral last?**

There's no set time. It depends on how many hymns or songs there are and how many people speak.

### **Will people cry at the funeral?**

Many people cry at funerals because they feel sad, and this is normal. However, there can also be happier moments when people remember the person who died and things they did together.

- Some people benefit from talking to a professional counsellor or psychotherapist. If you think you might need professional grief counselling, speak to your GP. They may be able to refer you for counselling. They may also be able to give you information about family counselling services and support groups.

Remember that you don't have to go through bereavement alone. There are lots of ways to get support, whether you prefer to talk to someone in person or join an online community. If you would like to speak to someone about your feelings, you can contact the Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309\***.

We have more information on looking after yourself when you're grieving in our booklet, *When someone dies*.

I felt guilty thinking, I can't have time off work, because Thomas still has to go to school. Me and my sister had a week off, then we went back to work. That was a mistake because it got to the point that I couldn't be strong anymore. You try to put a brave face on, but that face keeps on slipping.

Carole, whose mum was cared for in Marie Curie's Bradford Hospice