

## Talking to a Child About Death

As a parent, your first thought may be to shelter your child from the painful reality of death. You may even have trouble dealing with the death yourself and may not know how to offer the best support to your child. Not dealing with death or holding back the grieving process for either yourself or your child can lead to emotional difficulties over time. It is important for children to know they can share their feelings and get honest answers from their parents about death.

### What You Should Know

Your child's understanding of death depends on his or her age and experience. By the age of 9, children usually have a basic concept of death – they know that death is a permanent end of life and that it happens to everyone. However, they may wonder about the physical details of death: “Does it hurt when you die?” “What happens to a person's body after they die?”

A child may be afraid that his or her parents will die. You can reassure your child that you will do everything you can to keep him or her and your family safe. You can also reassure your child that if something happens to you, there will always be someone to take care of him or her.

Teenagers often feel that they are immortal and that death will not affect them. When someone dies, teens may react with defiance, anger or denial, and they may not want to talk about it. You can let your teen know that you are open to talking, without being pushy or insisting that he or she talk to you. Be on the lookout for unhealthy outlets for your teen's grief, such as substance use.

### What You Can Do

No matter how old your child is, he or she needs emotional support from you when someone dies. Here are some ways you can support your child through the grieving process:

- Tell the truth: Gentle but truthful language is best: “Grandpa died. He is not coming back, but we will always remember and love him.” Do not tell your child that a deceased person “went away” or “is asleep.” Even phrases like “passed away” or “is no longer with us” may be confusing for younger children.
- Share your grief: Express your feelings, and allow your child to express his or her feelings. Hiding your own grief from your child will send a message that it is not OK to cry or get upset.
- Comfort your child: Explaining that death is a part of life may help ease your child's fears of the unknown. If you are religious or spiritual, sharing your beliefs may help your child feel better.
- Help your child deal with difficult emotions, including anger, guilt, shame or confusion: These emotions sometimes stem from false ideas your child has about death. For example, a child may feel guilty and think that he or she did something to cause the death, or that he or she could have prevented the death but failed to do so. Correct these thoughts immediately.

### Resources

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)
- Children's Grief Education Association: [www.childgrief.org](http://www.childgrief.org)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

