

Death, Loss and Grief - Helping Children and Teens Understand and Cope

As death happens, we often try to protect those who are close to us from experiencing grief, especially children and teens. **Loss and grief are different for each person** because of their relationship and experiences with the person who is dying or has died. A child's and teen's age and stage of development are important in how they see and understand death. **It is important to listen and explain things in a way they can understand using clear and concrete words.** Talk to your children and teens about changes they may see in their loved one with poor health. Children and teens often sense something is wrong, and they may feel they are the source of the problem if they are not included in the grief process.

Talking about dying or death

Use these tips and the age-specific guidelines to help you talk with your children.

- Encourage your child to share what they know about the situation.
- Open communication and ongoing conversations help children prepare for the changes ahead.
- Do not be surprised if your child or teen only engages in the conversation for brief periods of time. Children will often take needed breaks for play and normal activities. This does not mean that they are not grieving. They can only process so much information and grief at a time. Help your child and teen to identify helpful ways of coping.
- Listen without judgment, use open ended questions, and give enough time for them to respond. This will encourage the child to express their thoughts and experience.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

- Children often express their feelings in behaviors and may not have the language skills or words to talk about their emotions.
- Make children feel as secure as possible when giving this information. Find a quiet space with little distraction and have comfort items within reach.
- Reassure the child or teen that they did nothing to cause the death.
- If there will be a change to home routines, tell the child or teen in advance. Reassure them that they will be taken care of, and who will provide this care.
- As children are learning about how to respond to loss, adults are a great role model for children to learn healthy expression of emotions and coping. It's okay to cry and express your feelings and talk about how you navigate these difficult feelings.
- Encourage your child and teen to use their strengths to help them cope and grow during this difficult time.

Infants and Toddlers

These young children may not understand what has happened, but they can sense sadness in their parents or siblings. They also sense a change in their normal activities.

- Tell them that they did not cause these changes in the people around them.
- Make extra time to hold, cuddle, and comfort them.
- Keep the child on schedule as much as possible.
- They may react by crying, being irritable, having trouble sleeping, wetting the bed or showing signs of separation anxiety.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

Death can be hard to understand for a preschooler. They may believe death is temporary or reversible or that their loved one is sleeping. Talk about death by using accurate words such as “died” rather than unclear phrases such as “gone to sleep.”

- Explain that when someone dies they no longer can see, hear, breathe, talk, move, think, feel or eat.
- They may ask many questions as a way to feel more secure and understand what is happening around them.

- Children this age have active imaginations, and they may believe they caused the death or can bring the person back if they wish long enough.
- Children may become upset, lose sleep or regress in behaviors such as bedwetting or thumb sucking. They may be anxious or afraid when separated from their parents.
- They may become upset and stressed when others are expressing strong emotions.
- Changes in eating or in how often they use the bathroom are also common reactions.

School age (5 to 12 years)

This age group needs simple, honest and accurate information.

- These children are likely to ask more detailed questions about death as they are starting to better understand how the body works.
- Explain the difference between being sick with a non-serious illness and having a terminal illness (expected to die).
- This age group is starting to understand that death is final, but likely believe it will not happen to them.
- Reassure them that everyone has questions about pain and death. Many times, it is hard for all of us to understand why things happen the way they do.
- They may benefit from art or play to express their feelings and emotions.
- Regressive behaviors and separation anxiety may happen as these children process their experience. It is helpful to offer increased comfort measures and give them permission to express their feelings.

Teenagers (12 to 18 years)

Although teens understand that everyone dies, they are developing their own identity and independence, and will need space to react to loss in their own way.

- Many teens feel they should act “grown up” and hide their feelings. Some may need privacy to process their grief while others may need time to talk.

- Provide information to your teen about the grief process and that it is “normal” to have intense and mixed emotions when grieving.
- Some teens may have questions about death, spirituality, or the meaning of life.
- Teenagers may want to talk to their friends more than to their parents or other adults.
- Remember that social media can be helpful and also sometimes not helpful. You may need to limit your teens use or provide guidance for navigating inaccurate or unhelpful information about grief. This may include what to share and not share on social media, or how to deal with others’ comments.
- Help your teen identify helpful ways of coping with their grief such as engaging in an activity that they enjoy or helps to ease their intense feelings. This may include journaling, talking about their grief, a hobby, exercise, sports, yoga, meditation/prayer, listening to music, artwork, outdoor activities, watching a movie, or reading.
- Since teens tend to feel more comfortable with their peers, a support group or grief camp could be a good outlet for them.
- Maintain routines and reasonable expectations as teenagers deal with their loss and grief. Continue to communicate clear limits and boundaries.
- If your teen is interested and feels comfortable, allow your teen to participate in future planning for holidays and other special days/events that include ways to remember your deceased loved one(s).

Community resources

You may want to talk to your child’s doctor, nurse, school counselor, teacher, coaches, social worker or psychologist. Support groups and other resources may be available through your local:

- Schools and libraries
- Churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, shrines
- Health departments or community mental health centers
- Hospitals and hospice programs
- Funeral homes