

Seven Suggestions for Explaining Death to Children and Teens

- **Explain the immediate cause of death simply and honestly** – Euphemisms, philosophical or religious platitudes can be confusing and can interfere with the child's ability to accept the reality of the death
“Your father died of a disease called cancer.” rather than *“God took your father because he was a good man.”* or *“Your Dad is visiting Heaven.”* or *“Your dad died because he was very sick.”*
- **Offer reassurance about their fears.** Children who experience the death of a loved one often fear for themselves or the lives of other family members. Talk openly and honestly with children . . . explain that *“even though your mommy died most people live until they are very old.”*
- **Offer reassurance that they are not to blame for the death.** Children are egocentric and are likely to think that they “caused” the death because of misbehaving, arguing or wishing harm to the deceased. Clearly explain that *“___ does not cause someone to die, cancer did.”*
- **Use correct terminology** when explaining what happens to the body when someone dies. Clearly state that *“the person's body has stopped working; they can't see, hear, talk, move, and we'll never see them alive again.”* Explain the process for burial or cremation and make it clear that the person cannot feel anything anymore. Share beliefs about what happens to the invisible part of the person if applicable.
- **Recognize that** children need to know who will care for and love them should something happen to their surviving caregivers.
“Mommy doesn't plan on anything happening but if something does, Aunt Jenny will be there to take care of and love you.”
- **Include children in family mourning rituals.** Children benefit from the proximity to loved ones and from experiencing the rituals. Explain what will happen and who will be there. Ask them if there is anything special that they would like to say or do. Have a caring adult there to support them and answer any questions they might have.
- **Accept children's thoughts and feelings about the death.** Children often have a wide range of emotions after a death and grieve differently than adults. Their attention spans are limited so they can only handle small amounts of pain/grief at a time; therefore, they may be openly sad one moment and happily playing the next. This is natural behavior especially for younger children. Know that they will have new awareness and new questions about their grief when they enter each developmental stage.

What To Say To Help Your Grieving Friend

Instead of saying this...

- “I’m sorry for your loss”
- “Don’t feel sad, it’ll get better”
- “Why haven’t you been at school?”
- “Don’t think about the death”
- “I know just how you feel, my dog died last year”
- “Why aren’t you talking about it?”
- “It must have been God’s plan, he’s in a better place”
- “It’s been 6 months; shouldn’t you be over it by now?”

Try saying this...

- “I’m sorry to hear your mom/dad died”
- “I’m not sure what to say but I want you to know that I care”
- “We have all missed you at school”
- “Are you thinking about or missing your mom/dad?”
- “I can’t imagine what it feels like to have a parent die”
- “I’m always here for you if you want to talk or not talk”
- “Do you wonder where your mom/dad is now?”
- “What are things you do that help you when you feel sad?”