

# Supporting Children: Talking About Death and Dying

Talking about death and dying with children can be uncomfortable, difficult or scary. These conversations can happen in many ways before or after a death. No matter the timing or the space, honest and clear conversations are key in helping the child understand the situation.

## Tips for conversation

Follow these suggestions for support:

- › Ask the child what they already know about the situation. They often know more than we think, and a question can make a baseline for your conversation.
  - Example: “Can you tell me what you know about why your loved one needed to go to the hospital?”
- › Read a children’s book about or related to death and dying.
- › Try explaining death in a concrete way.
  - Example: “When someone’s body gets very sick or very hurt, the body can stop working. When a body stops working and will never work again, this means they died.”
- › Use clear words like “death,” “dying,” “dead” or “died.” This will decrease confusion and help the child understand.
- › Explain that the medical helpers like nurses and doctors did their best to take care of their loved one.
  - Example: “Sometimes bodies are too sick or too hurt for the medical helpers to fix. No medicines, surgeries or machines could help their body stay alive.”

- › Allow your child to see you if you become emotional during the conversation. This helps them understand that it is normal to express and share emotions.
- › Everyone copes differently, including children. They might not cope in the way we expect. Young children might end the conversation and want to engage in play directly after.
- › Allow time for questions both during and after conversations. Children might need time to let the information sink in. They might ask questions hours or even days after your conversation.
- › If you do not have an answer to a question, let them know.
  - Example: “I do not know the answer to that right now, but if I find out, I will let you know. Maybe we can write it down, so we do not forget.”

## Addressing individual and developmental needs

Every child has their own concept of death. Past experiences with death, as well as age, emotional development and surroundings are what most influence a child’s idea of death. Cartoons, movies, video games and other media have images or descriptions of death. The child may have experienced the death of a family member, friend or pet in the past.

An adult’s feelings and fear about death often transfer to their children. Treating death as a part of life is hard. However, it can help ease some of the fear and confusion linked with it.

All children are different. Some will be more mature than others in their thinking. Below are some common ideas about death, organized by developmental age.

### Infants

- › Infants have no concept of death. Infants do react to separation from a parent, painful procedures and any change in their routine.
- › Keeping a consistent routine is important for a baby and their caregivers. Since babies cannot talk about it, they often express fear by crying.

## Toddlers

- › Death has very little meaning for toddlers. They may feel anxious and afraid because people around them are sad, depressed, scared or angry. Toddlers may also not understand the terms “death,” “forever” or “permanent.”
- › Even with past experiences with death, the child may not understand the relationship between life and death. To them, death is not permanent.

## Preschool

- › Children around this age may start to understand that adults fear death. These children might view death as short-term or reversible, as cartoons sometimes show.
- › Most children in this age group do not understand that death is permanent. They do not know that everyone and every living thing will die. And they do not know that dead things do not eat, sleep, or breathe. Do not explain death as “sleep” to them. This may cause fear of sleep or nightmares.
- › Young children’s experience with death comes from people around them. They may ask questions about why and how death happens. They may feel that their thoughts or actions caused the death and feel the sadness of those around them. They may feel guilt and shame.

## School age

- › School-age children have a more realistic view of death. They may see death as an angel, skeleton or ghost. They start to see death as permanent. They know that everyone dies.
- › They may be very curious about the physical process of death and what happens after a person dies. They may fear their own death because they do not know what happens after they die. Fear of the unknown, loss of control, and separation from family and friends can cause anxiety and fear related to death.

## Teens

- › As with people of all ages, past experiences and emotional development influence a teen’s concept of death. Most teens understand that death is permanent and that everyone dies. Some may have experienced the death of a family member, friend or pet.

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- › Most teens are starting to establish their identity, independence and relation to peers. A main theme for teens is feeling immortal or being exempt from death. Denial and defiant attitudes may suddenly change the personality of a teen.
  - › Teens may feel they no longer belong or fit in with their peers. They may also feel that they cannot talk with their parents. Teens may feel alone in their struggle or even scared and angry.

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If you need support in talking about death and dying with children, you can email a child life specialist at **[NMHChildLife@nm.org](mailto:NMHChildLife@nm.org)**.