



How to talk to children and young people about death

Talking to children and young people about the death of a sibling might feel difficult. As adults we want to protect children from unhappiness and negativity, but this isn't always possible, and children need us to be open and honest. We often feel our children are too young to be talking about and facing these feelings. It can be extremely difficult when managing your own grief emotions, we can be anxious and feel that we may not handle the conversation correctly or think we may say the wrong thing. However difficult it may feel at the time it will support your child's emotional wellbeing in the future and shows that that you are available for them.

The good news is that children are often better at talking about death than adults, so it is important that we allow them to explore their thoughts and feelings with the people they feel most able to do that with, and often this is their family and the people they are closest to.

You don't have to have all the answers to be able to support a child or young person when talking about death, but what is important to remember is if a child has been brave enough to ask you a question don't avoid it, be brave enough to answer, even if their question comes at an awkward moment.

What can be helpful is:

- Take them seriously
- To be open and honest, children know when you are not
- Support their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment
- Listen carefully, validate their feelings and show you understand
- Encourage questions
- Make time to answer these questions
- Be honest if you don't know the answer
- Use plain and simple language "died and dead" not gone to sleep or passed away
- Keep conversations short and simple
- Don't be afraid to show your emotions, it is ok to cry and be sad
- Don't avoid topics



Children will jump in and out of their grief and this has been referred to as “puddle jumping.” They can be extremely upset one minute, leaving you feeling like you don’t know what to do or say, then suddenly they switch and may ask “what’s for tea.” It’s important to remember this is often a cycle with children’s grief.

Words or phrases to avoid

When talking to children and young people about death it’s important to consider the language we use, keep it plain and simple! Dead and Died

A lot of adults find this hard. However, if we don’t use simple words it can be extremely confusing and scary for children.

- “Gone to sleep” this can make a child scared of sleeping as they may feel they will not wake up.
- “People only die when they get old” this is not true
- “I’m sorry you’ve lost your brother/sister” this can make it sound like someone can be found
- “Sarah passed away” this can sound like they are coming back

Things you could say

- “Do you understand what I mean when I say”
- “What do you think about that?”
- “Can I check I understand you when you say...”
- “It’s ok to feel sad and be sad”
- “Grown-ups find that difficult too”
- “No one really knows but I believe/but some people believe that...”



Useful resources and links

Activity books

'Muddy puddle and sunshine' by Diana Crossley

'Someone I know has died' by Trisha Phillips

Books

"I miss you" a first look at death Pat Thomas

'No Matter What' by Debi Gliori

"The dragonfly story" Kelly Owen

'Sad' by Michel Rosen

"The coat I wear" Mel Maxwell

Websites

Winston's wish www.winstonswish.org

Grief encounter www.griefencounter.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK www.childbereavementuk.org