

How to Talk to Children and Young People About Death

Talking to children and young people about the death of a sibling can feel incredibly daunting. As adults, we naturally want to protect children from pain, sadness, and difficult emotions. But shielding them from the truth isn't always possible, and in the long run, openness helps them feel safer, more supported, and more connected to the adults they trust.

Many adults worry that children are “too young” to understand or cope with conversations about death. You may also be managing your own grief, which can make these conversations feel even more overwhelming. It's common to feel anxious about saying the wrong thing or not knowing how to respond. Despite these fears, talking honestly with children supports their emotional wellbeing and shows them that you are available, present, and willing to walk alongside them through their grief.

The reassuring news is that children are often more open and direct about death than adults. They tend to ask straightforward questions and express their feelings in simple, honest ways. What they need most is the space to explore their thoughts with people they trust—usually their family and the adults closest to them.

You don't need to have all the answers. What matters is that you are willing to listen, respond, and stay with them in the conversation. If a child is brave enough to ask a question, try not to avoid it. Even if the timing feels awkward, answering shows them that their feelings and curiosity are valid.

Helpful Approaches

Take them seriously. Their questions and feelings matter, even if they seem small or unexpected.

- **Be open and honest.** Children sense when adults are hiding something, which can create confusion or fear.
- **Create a safe environment.** Let them know it's okay to talk about the person, their feelings, or their worries.
- **Listen carefully.** Reflect back what you hear and validate their emotions.
- **Encourage questions.** Curiosity is part of how children make sense of the world.
- **Make time for conversations.** They may ask things gradually, not all at once.
- **Be honest if you don't know.** It's okay to say, “I'm not sure, but we can think about it together.”
- **Use clear, simple language.** Words like “dead” and “died” are clearer than phrases like “gone to sleep” or “passed away.”
- **Keep conversations short and manageable.** Children often process information in small pieces.
- **Show your emotions.** It's okay for them to see you sad or crying—it teaches them that feelings are normal.
- **Don't avoid the topic.** Avoidance can make death feel more frightening or mysterious.



Understanding Children's Grief: "Puddle Jumping"

Children often move in and out of their grief very quickly—this is sometimes called "puddle jumping." They may be deeply upset one moment, then suddenly switch to asking what's for tea or wanting to play. This doesn't mean they aren't grieving; it's simply how children cope. Their brains can only manage strong emotions in short bursts, so they dip in and out as they need to.

This pattern can feel confusing for adults, but it's a normal and healthy part of childhood grief.

Words and Phrases to Avoid

Children take language literally, so unclear or symbolic phrases can be confusing or frightening. Try to avoid:

"Gone to sleep."

This can make children afraid of sleeping in case they don't wake up.

"People only die when they get old."

Children know this isn't always true, and it can damage trust.

"I'm sorry you've lost your brother / sister."

Children may take this literally and think the person can be found.

"Sarah passed away."

Euphemisms can make it sound like the person might return.

Using clear, concrete words helps children understand what has happened and reduces unnecessary fear.

Words and Phrases to Avoid

"Do you understand what I mean when I say...?"

"It's okay to feel sad and to be sad."

"What do you think about that?"

"Grown-ups find that difficult too."

"Can I check I understand you when you say...?"

"No one really knows, but I believe... / Some people believe that..."





Additional Tips to Support Children and Young People

Give them choices

Children feel more secure when they have some control. You might ask:

- “Would you like to talk now or later?”
- “Do you want to look at photos together or not today?”

Use books, drawings, or play

Younger children often express themselves through play or art. Drawing, storytelling, or using toys can help them communicate feelings they can't yet put into words.

Repeat information when needed

Children often need to hear explanations more than once. Repetition helps them process and understand.

Maintain routines

Familiar routines help children feel safe when everything else feels uncertain.

Reassure them about their own safety

Children may worry that other family members will die too. Simple reassurance can help them feel more secure.

Let them remember

Encourage memories, stories, and rituals. Talking about the and sharing the person who died helps keep their connection alive in a healthy way.

Useful resources and links

Activity books

- Muddy puddle and sunshine by Diana Crossley
- Someone I know has died by Trisha Phillips
- The Invisible string workbook Patrice Karst

Books

- I miss you a first look at death Pat Thomas
- No Matter What by Debi Gliori
- The dragonfly story By Kelly Owen
- Sad by Michel Rosen
- Where are you Eddie? by Michel Rosen
- The coat I wear Mel Maxwell
- Where are you Lydie Emma Poore
- The Invisible string Patrice Karst

Websites

Grief encounter www.griefencounter.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK
www.childbereavementuk.org

The Good Grief Trust
www.goodgrieftrust.org

Please contact us on hello@bodiehodgesfoundation.co.uk or call **0116 2436367**
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