

doucettetherapy

Talking with **Children** **About Death**

When faced with a death in the family, parents often struggle with how to share the information with children. The following guiding principles outline how caregivers can speak to children about death of a loved one and support them with their grief.



1 Share the news as soon as possible:

Delays can mean children hear the news accidentally, from someone they are not close to, or feel hurt that it was kept from them. Adults may need a short time to gather themselves and access some initial support of their own, so they can be as grounded as possible. Then, they should make it a priority to gather children who are affected and tell them about the death. Ideally, children hear about the news from their parent, close family members or another trusted adult.

2 Begin with care and clarity:

Start with a gentle but direct invitation: "We need to talk about something important. Please come sit with me." Then share the facts simply and without delay. Holding back the key information can heighten a child's anxiety. Remember, it is fine and even helpful to show emotion when speaking about the death, as this models for children that they, too, can express their feelings. You don't need to speak perfectly or get every detail just right – your caring presence is most important.

3 Use clear, honest language.

Avoid phrases like “We lost her” or “He’s gone to sleep”, as this type of indirect language can be confusing and distressing. It is best to stay factual, and say something like, “I have very sad news. Grandma died today.” Then, be ready with hugs, comfort and validation of the emotions. In an effort to soften the impact of the news, adults will sometimes avoid factual statements, which comes from a place of love and attempt to protect. In reality, it’s a kindness to be clear and direct in your communication.

4 Share essential facts, and leave space for more.

Begin with what’s most important. Then reassure your child that it’s okay to ask questions later: “You can always come back to talk to me more about this. I’ll check in with you, too.” This gives them time to process and lets them know the conversation isn’t over.

5 Be specific about the cause of death.

Vague explanations like “He got sick” can create anxiety. A child might believe they caused the death by sharing a cold, or they may fear they themselves could die from an ordinary illness. You might say, as an example, “Grandma died because she had cancer, and her type of cancer could not be cured.”

6 Be honest about suicide and addiction.

Children deserve to be told the truth, even when it's more challenging to talk about. Losses due to mental health, suicide and addictions are very complex to grieve, but the cause of death should still be spoken about. Most importantly, children should never be told a lie about the death, in an effort to protect them. This can ultimately backfire and cause them more suffering or difficulty in family relationships. Typically, kids do find out the truth eventually, sometimes years later. This can lead to confusion and anger towards caregivers. Tell the truth gently, and offer ongoing emotional support around that reality. Being honest about even difficult realities reinforces a sense of trust and safety with children. This is ultimately in their best interests for long term coping.

7 Invite children to be part of rituals and traditions.

Funerals, wakes, and memorials help children mourn, with the benefit of community and support. Children and teens often benefit from taking on a role during the service, such as lighting a candle or reading a poem. Some of my brave young clients have even written and delivered eulogies. They often find the process therapeutic and are proud of how they are honouring and remembering their loved one. If a child resists attending a service or memorial, take time to explore their worries and gently encourage participation, even in a small way. Most people don't regret attending, but many do regret missing the chance to honour their loved one.

8 Understand how children grieve when talking about death.

Children aren't miniature adults. Their grief comes in waves. One moment they may cry; the next, they're off playing. This isn't avoidance, it's healthy coping. They live more in the present than we do, which can be a gift in grief. Their minds and bodies need some breaks from the intense emotions and they tend to be quite good at creating this balance. Remind yourself that they will grieve in their own unique way, that may look quite different from your grief as an adult.

9 **Keep the door open for questions.**

Let your child know that all questions are welcome—even the big ones:

“Will I die?”

“What happens when we die?”

“Where is my Dad now?”

Your answers will reflect your own beliefs. It's okay to say, “I don't know for sure,” or “That's something I wonder about, too.” You can also ask, “What do you think?” And if you need time to think about how to answer a tough question, say so. “That's a really important question. I'm glad you asked. Let me think about it and I'll get back to you soon.” Then follow up, after your own chance to reflect, so they know their questions matter.

10 **Listening is the most powerful response to their emotions.**

One of the hardest parts of telling a child that someone they love has died is knowing you can't fix it. As parents, we long to protect our children from life's biggest hurts. But death reminds us that some pain can't be solved, only supported.

When your child shares intense emotions, resist the urge to make it better. Just listen. Offer your empathy, not solutions.

"No wonder you feel so sad. I'm here with you."

"All your feelings are okay. I'm really glad you're telling me." These simple, loving responses help children feel safe and understood, which is exactly what they need the most.