



WORDS TO USE - AND WORDS TO AVOID - WHEN TALKING ABOUT DEATH

*Helping Children Understand Death Through Clear,
Honest Language*

The words adults use after a death can shape how a child understands what has happened. Because children often interpret language literally, familiar expressions such as “went to sleep,” “passed away,” or “we lost her” may create confusion or new fears. Clear, gentle, concrete language can help a child begin to understand death while feeling supported by the adults around them.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT MAY BE HAPPENING

Adults often soften the language of death because they want to protect children. The intention is loving, but vague language can leave a child trying to make sense of words that do not match reality. A young child may wonder when the person will wake up, whether someone who is “lost” can be found, or whether another loved one who goes away will also die.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- The child may repeat a confusing phrase and ask when the person is coming back.
- They may develop fears about sleep, separation, illness, travel, or other ordinary experiences.
- They may create their own explanation when important information is missing.

GENTLE REMINDER

Clear language does not take away a child's sadness. It helps remove unnecessary confusion and gives the child a more trustworthy understanding of what happened.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Use the words “died” and “death” in a calm, caring way. Give a short explanation of what death means and then pause. Let the child's questions guide how much more information is needed. It is appropriate to say, “I don't know,” when something is uncertain.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

You might say, “Grandpa died. His body stopped working, and it cannot start working again.” Or, “Mom died because she was very sick. Most illnesses do not make people die.” Reassure the child about what remains stable: who will care for them, where they will live, and what will happen next.

A DEEPER LOOK

Children need truthful information, but truth does not require graphic detail. The goal is to provide enough information to answer the child's question without overwhelming them. The amount and type of detail should reflect the child's age, developmental level, and the circumstances of the death.





WORDS TO USE WITH CARE

Avoid promising that no one else will ever die. Instead, offer realistic reassurance: “Most people live for a very long time, and I expect to be here to take care of you.” If spiritual beliefs are part of the family, they can be shared alongside a concrete explanation of physical death so the child understands both.

WHEN A CHILD ASKS A HARD QUESTION

A direct question does not always require a long answer. Ask what the child is wondering, answer simply, and check their understanding. Children often take in information a little at a time.

REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

The same explanation may need to be revisited as a child grows. Words that were enough at age five may lead to new questions at age nine or fourteen. Keep the conversation open rather than treating one discussion as final.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Simple, truthful words spoken with care are often more reassuring than softened words a child cannot understand.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Think about the words your family has been using to describe the death. Are any of them likely to confuse a child? What simple, truthful sentence could make the explanation clearer?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

If the death was violent, traumatic, or especially complicated, or if you are uncertain how much information to share, a qualified child mental-health or bereavement professional can help you plan language that is honest and developmentally appropriate.

A GENTLE CLOSING

Children do not need perfect wording. They need adults who are willing to tell the truth gently, listen carefully, correct misunderstandings, and return to the conversation whenever new questions arise.

What words would help this child understand what happened without giving more information than they need right now?

KEEPING LANGUAGE CONSISTENT

When several adults care for a child, it can help to agree on the basic words being used. Children may become more confused if one adult says the person is “sleeping,” another says they are “gone,” and another explains that they died. Adults do not need identical scripts, but a shared, truthful explanation gives the child a steadier foundation.

Before important conversations, caregivers can briefly decide what the child already knows, what information is appropriate now, and how questions about spiritual beliefs will be answered. Consistency does not mean avoiding emotion; it means giving the child information they can trust.

