



TALKING TO A CHILD ABOUT DEATH

*Using Honest, Simple, and Caring Words When
Someone Has Died*

Talking with a child about death can feel intimidating, especially when the adults are grieving too. Many caregivers worry about saying the wrong thing or causing more pain. Children usually benefit from information that is truthful, simple, and appropriate for their age, offered by a trusted adult who is willing to listen and return to the conversation.

START WITH SIMPLE, CONCRETE LANGUAGE

Children can be confused by expressions adults commonly use for death. Phrases such as “we lost him,” “she went to sleep,” or “he went away” may lead a young child to fear sleeping, getting lost, or being separated. Using the words “died” and “death” gently can make the explanation clearer.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- A child may ask very direct questions that feel surprising or uncomfortable to adults.
- They may ask the same question repeatedly, even after receiving an answer.
- They may want only a small amount of information before returning to play or another activity.

GENTLE REMINDER

You do not have to explain everything in one conversation. Tell the truth in manageable pieces and let the child's questions guide what comes next.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Give one clear piece of information at a time. Pause and see what the child asks next. Correct misunderstandings gently and reassure the child about who will care for them. Avoid giving graphic details that the child did not request or cannot developmentally understand.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

You might say: “I have something very sad to tell you. Grandma died today.” Then explain briefly what that means. If the child asks why, answer honestly at a level they can understand. If you do not know, say so. Honest uncertainty is less confusing than an invented explanation.

A DEEPER LOOK

Children often fill gaps in information with their own ideas. Those ideas can be more frightening than the truth. They may believe something they thought, said, or did caused the death, or worry that death is contagious. Asking, “What are you thinking about what happened?” can reveal misunderstandings that need reassurance.





IT IS OKAY FOR CHILDREN TO SEE ADULT EMOTION

Adults do not have to hide every tear. Seeing a trusted adult cry can teach a child that sadness is a natural response to loss. The important distinction is that the child should not feel responsible for taking care of the adult.

You might say, “I am crying because I miss Dad. I am sad, and I am still here to take care of you.”

- Calm honesty helps children learn that strong feelings can be expressed and survived.
- A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION
- WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

A child is more likely to remember that a caring adult stayed present and answered honestly than whether every sentence was perfect.

If you are unsure how to explain a particularly traumatic, violent, or complicated death, or if the child's reactions raise ongoing concerns, a qualified child mental-health professional or bereavement specialist can help you plan developmentally appropriate conversations.

LET THE CHILD SET THE PACE

Some children want many details; others ask one question and move on. Follow the child's lead while making sure essential facts and safety information are clear. A short answer can be enough until the next question comes.

SUPPORTING THE CHILD IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Keep the conversation open after the first discussion. Check in gently, especially before funerals, school transitions, holidays, or other reminders. Let the child know they can return to any question, even one they have already asked.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What does this child need to know right now? What can wait until they ask or are developmentally ready for more information?

A GENTLE CLOSING

Talking about death is not a one-time task. It is an ongoing relationship of honesty and trust. A caring adult who can say, “We can talk about this whenever you need to,” gives a child a safe place to keep understanding the loss.

With heartfelt compassion,
Linda Findlay
Founder, Mourning Discoveries

