

# **Finding the Right Words: Guidelines on how to talk to grieving children about death**

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Through the years I have learned a great deal from many grieving children and their families. They have taught me which words work best when talking to children about death. Here are some general concepts I suggest companions use when talking with children about death, dying, grief, and mourning.

## **Talk openly about death**

The child's journey through grief depends on you being honest and open about the death he has experienced. You may feel that if you are quiet and don't talk about it, you are helping him forget about the death and not be reminded of the pain it brings. Yet this kind of protection doesn't help for too long. Of course you mean well, but by not talking about the death, which is foremost on everyone's minds, you only cause him to feel confused and alone in his grief. It might even make him feel more afraid.

When talking with children, use simple, concrete language. Until they become teenagers, children are quite literal. Try not to use abstract or complex descriptions for death. It's OK to use the "d" word (death or dying). Explain death in a straightforward manner, without the use of metaphors or analogies such as "passed away," "taking a long sleep," "left us," or "in a better place". Be open to discussing the death and his thoughts and feelings about it again and again. That's because healing is a process, not an event.

## **Share your feelings**

A natural part of healing is seeing that others feel the same way that you do. Let the child see you grieving and mourning. Don't be afraid of scaring her by letting her see you cry. Remember, crying is really an act of strength, not weakness. Crying together is healing. It allows you to express your grief in a raw and honest way. By grieving together you send the strong message that she is not alone in her grief.

## **Be honest and direct**

Answer questions simply and directly. Adults may think they need to explain everything, but young children are often satisfied with an honest, short answer. For example, just the first two sentences of this explanation would suffice: "I think it is sad that Grandpa died. What do you think? Yet Grandpa had a long and happy life. Some people are not ready to die because they haven't done enough, but Grandpa did so much. Did you know he was in World War II? Anyway, he was blessed with so much. Much more than most people, so in a way I think he was ready to die...."

## **Avoid euphemisms**

Saying a dead person is "asleep," for example, will not only mislead a child, it may also cause her to believe that the dead person might "wake up" again. Or if you say, "It was God's will," she might feel angry at God for taking her mother, sister, or friend away from her. Or she might believe that God is punishing her. Remember, young children take things literally, so such abstractions are often confusing. Also, keep in mind that children can cope with what they know. They cannot cope with what they don't know or have been "protected" from knowing.

## **Give inviting, loving nonverbal cues**

For children, the language of comfort is often physical—through holding, hugging, snuggling, and affection. Spend time simply sitting next to or holding the child. Your close physical presence is a conversation in itself.

When talking about the death or the child's grief, stay aware of your tone and make eye contact. With warmth, sincerity, and a relaxed open face, send the message that whatever she says is OK, allowing her to express her fears and wishes freely. Allow long pauses after questions or gaps in talking for her to fill or not.

Sometimes it's easier for older children to talk without direct eye contact or while doing something else, such as riding in the car, walking together, cooking, or doing another activity together. Create ample opportunities for these casual, inviting situations.

It's also important to honor how children best express themselves—and sometimes that's not through talking. Maybe it's drawing, writing in a journal, singing loudly, roughhousing, dancing, doing crafts, watching videos, or looking through pictures to remember the person who died. Tune in to the child's personality and create opportunities for various ways for her to express her grief.

### **Attend to your own grief**

If you are a parent or family member, most likely you are also grieving the death of the person who died. When you are overwhelmed by death, it's hard to think of anything else, including the needs of those around you.

It's important for you to carve out time and honor your own grief. If you are responsible for the fulltime care of a child, you will have to do the same for her—creating time for her to grieve with you and separately. Giving attention to another's grief can be challenging when grief has shaken you deeply, but try your best to be available to your child, who feels shocked and confused by the death of a family member or a loved one. If, understandably, you just can't do it right now, find another loving adult who can.

Your child needs full-on love and attention right now—at a time when it might feel the hardest to give. Remember that your grief may look very different than her grief. While you may be overwhelmed with sadness, her feelings may be more muddled and undefined. She may be able to digest just a little of her grief at a time before needing a mental and emotional break, while your grief may be all-consuming.

It's important to ask for help from friends and family; let them take on some of the responsibility of companioning your child through her grief. The task may even be too large for you and your circle of friends and family to handle. If so, that's OK. Enlist a professional counselor or seek the help of grief support groups as needed. Mostly, be gentle with yourself and know you are doing the best you can.