

## A Guide:

# How to talk to children about death and dying

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## **Introduction**

Death is very much a part of life, yet instead of feeling empowered and confident to talk about it, we often tend to regard it as a taboo, perhaps because the idea of it may be unthinkable. Death though, is something that we all encounter throughout our lives and eventually, it happens to all of us.

As a hospice, we believe that the better we're able to discuss the subject of death as being a natural part of life, the less scary it can become.

For those of us who have children in our lives, there will come a time when they will begin to share and express their natural curiosities about what death and dying is and what it means. We may have been through the same thing when we were younger.

Children deserve honest answers about death and dying, but we as adults can feel worried about saying the wrong things. We may fear that our children could feel unhappy or scared about what they hear us say. Unconsciously, we may also want to protect ourselves against what might be our own intolerable feelings in relation to witnessing our children's expression of their emotions. However, by talking about it we can support our children by answering their questions, thus helping them to 'make sense' of their concerns.

Our aim is to offer support to adults to feel more comfortable to approach the subject of death and dying and engage in meaningful conversations with children and family.

We appreciate that whilst we have tried to consider multi-cultural needs, some of the guide may not relate to your beliefs or way of doing things. As such, you may wish to consult with a community spiritual adviser for additional support.

We believe that by talking to children about death and dying, we can help to demystify fear and anxiety around death for generations to come.

**Joanne Feld**  
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## **Why do children need to talk about death and dying?**

Sometimes, adults hesitate to bring children into conversations about death and dying. We think we are protecting them when, in fact, we cannot protect our children from death.

They encounter it all the time – whether it be a dead insect in the garden or a mouse the cat brought in, or something very personal like the fact that their grandparent is going to die soon.

Death features frequently throughout our lives and experiences of the world, from a very early age. Therefore, it is only natural that at some point in a child's life, they will become curious about what death is and what it means.

Very early on in their lives, children begin to form their own thoughts, beliefs and ideas about death. Although by the age of eight, many children understand that death is permanent and happens to everyone, it can still be difficult to get to grips with the idea – just as it is for most of us adults, too!

Children deserve honest answers from those who they confide in about their thoughts, feelings and questions about death. As a natural part of life, there is nothing to be fearful of in letting your child know what death is.

By talking about it openly and in a positive way, we can reassure and support our children to understand their thoughts and feelings about death and dying.

But, we can all feel an inherent need to keep our children safe from harm, unhappiness and negativity. Many of us may feel that our children are too young to be worrying about things like dying and our first instinct is to protect them, and perhaps ourselves, from experiencing the discomfort that challenging feelings can evoke.

The truth is, that children are never too young to talk about death and dying. Although our good intentions are there to protect our children, they could be doing more harm than good.

Sometimes, it is our own fears that keep us from talking about death and dying. We can fear what we may hear, and could be anxious that we may not be able to handle a conversation emotionally – or that we might say the wrong thing. In fact, children are often better at talking about death and dying than adults are!

However, if we keep avoiding the topic...

- Their misunderstandings may grow – and myths can take over
- Their imaginations can run wild – whilst the truth is often less scary!
- They can feel isolated and guilty about what they think
- They may not feel that they can ask questions
- They can feel that death is something you mustn't talk about

- They may feel their feelings are not valid
- Their fears may be perpetuated

It can be much better to alleviate misunderstandings about death, funerals, burial and cremation before a child is confronted with these things when a loved one dies.

We may want to encourage our children to express their emotions, and help them to feel that it is okay to talk about these things with someone they trust.

One of the most important reasons to talk to our children about death and dying is that it helps to demystify fears and anxieties for future generations. It can help our children to feel confident to talk to their children, and so on.

When we are able to approach death and dying as peacefully and positively as possible, we can feel better empowered to live our days to the fullest.

## **How to talk to children about death**

You can reassure and support a child with their thoughts, feelings and understandings of death and dying by talking through it. Even if you don't have the answers or don't know what to say, a child will appreciate that you have tried more than if you dismiss or ignore them.

The best thing that we can do for children is support them to explore and express their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment. Make time to take their questions and curiosities seriously.

Here are some tips on having a conversation with a child about death and dying:

- Be led by their questions and what they want to know.
- Listen carefully, and try to understand what the child means.
- Be honest. Children will know if you try to hide the truth from them.
- If you don't know the answer, say so. It's okay! Even if you feel you have answered the question badly, it's more important to the child that you have tried and paid attention.
- Show that talking about death and dying is allowed through the way you talk about it and through your body language.
- Answer the child as soon as they ask you – their attention span may be limited!
- Keep it short and sweet. It's usually better to have a series of short conversations.
- Try to be direct and use plain language. Say 'died' and 'dead' instead of 'passed away,' 'lost' or 'gone to sleep' to avoid confusion. Children understand words very literally. You may need to check that they have understood what you meant.
- If you are discussing the death of a loved one or a pet, it is okay to show your emotions. It can help a child to feel their grief is acceptable too.
- You will know what tone and language to use when speaking to a child who is close to you – follow your instinct.
- Encourage questions. Even if you have answered them a hundred times, try to give them the same answers. This will help to reassure them and help them begin to process the information.
- Ask them to tell their story about what they think death and dying is. This can help you to correct anything that isn't quite right, and help them to discover that the way they see things may change over time.

## Addressing the subject of death and dying

Talking about death and dying with a child can be better if it comes about naturally.

Use any opportunity that arises, taking your cues from the questions that they ask or from things that happen throughout day-to-day life. It can be best to be led by their questions and what they want to know.

We can begin talking about death with children by:

- Talking about how life and death go together in the circle of life.
- By using examples in the natural world, such as leaves falling or flowers withering, we are able to express that death is a normal part of life that every living thing encounters.
- We can also use books to talk about death and dying. There are many books that have been specifically created to help teach and educate children (see our list on page 12-13).
- Finding a dead animal or insect, or when a family pet dies, can create an opportunity to start talking about death. Let the child be there when the animal is buried, and carry out rituals like sharing memories, reading a poem or planting flowers.
- It can also be beneficial to let children come to funerals if they want to, because they are a way of saying goodbye. It is a good idea to tell them what they can expect beforehand.

For example, telling them that: the dead person is carried down the aisle in a coffin, people may be crying and upset, a curtain may close around the coffin, people will read things like poems, afterwards there will be a party where people eat and drink in celebration of their life.

## Questions children may ask about death

Talking about death and dying isn't easy when you feel you don't have the answers. However, trying is far better than ignoring the question. By answering them you are letting the child know that it is okay to ask, that you have taken the time to pay attention, and that you take their thoughts and curiosities seriously.

Sometimes, children are able to talk about death a lot more easily than adults! They may even ask practical questions that sound strange...

- What's it like inside a coffin?
- What does a dead body look like?
- Do dead people turn into ghosts?
- What happens to the body when it gets buried?
- Does cremation hurt?

However, a child's thoughts and ideas about death and dying are all perfectly valid and sensible things to wonder. It can be very reassuring to a child to discuss these things, instead of dismissing them as silly.

Depending on a child's age, development, and previous experience of death, their concept of death and dying will vary. By tailoring your answers to your own child, you will be able to support them as best as you can.

A child may ask some questions that are difficult to answer, but there is no need to be nervous or worried about your answer. Remember: it is okay not to know the answer!

Here are some questions and answers that you may want to use in your own conversations with your child. You may need to adjust your answers based on your own specific religious or spiritual beliefs.

## Questions about death and dying

**Q** "Am I going to die?"

**A** "Yes, one day. Everyone dies eventually, but it probably won't be for a long time. People usually die when they are very old."

If this question has been triggered by the death of someone the child knew, you can say: "You won't die just because someone who you know has died."

**Q** "Are you going to die?"

**A** "Yes, one day. Everyone dies eventually, but it probably won't be for a long time. People usually die when they are very old."

**Q** “What does dead mean?”

**A** “Something or somebody who’s dead doesn’t move, or eat, or breathe, or do anything. They cannot feel pain anymore.”

**Q** “What is death?”

**A** “Death happens when someone’s body stops working. They no longer breathe, eat or drink. Their body goes cold and stays very still.”

**Q** “Why do people die?”

**A** “Someone’s body might have been damaged by a bad accident, or they might have had a very serious illness or disease that doctors couldn’t make better.”

**Q** “When do people die?”

**A** “Most people die because they are very old and their body is worn out. But not everyone who dies is very old.”

**Q** “Is death forever?”

**A** “Yes. When someone dies nothing can bring them back to life.”

**Q** “Does death hurt?”

**A** “Nobody knows for sure whether it hurts at the moment you die.”

## **Questions about what happens after death**

**Q** “What is a funeral?”

**A** “Funerals are special ceremonies that give family and friends who cared about the person who died a chance to come together to remember them, to say goodbye and to celebrate their life. A funeral may be at a religious building such as a chapel, church, temple, synagogue or mosque. Sometimes they are at a place called a crematorium.”

**Q** “What happens at a funeral?”

**A** “The body of the person who died is usually put in a special box called a coffin. Music is often played and people usually speak about the person who died. The body of the person who died may be buried in the ground. Sometimes instead of being buried people are cremated. This is when the body is turned in to soft ashes.”

**Q** “What do people wear to funerals?”

**A** “People sometimes wear black or dark clothes to go to a Christian funeral. However some people don’t like to do this. And sometimes the person who died may have said that they didn’t want people to wear dark clothes. In different cultures, different colours can be worn. For example, Hindus wear white to funerals.”

**Q** “Why do people dress up?”

**A** “People dress up as a mark of respect to the person who has died.”

**Q** “How long does the funeral last?”

**A** “There is no set time. It depends on how many hymns or songs there are and how many people speak.”

**Q** “Will people cry at the funeral?”

**A** “Many people cry at funerals because they feel sad. However, there can also be happier moments when people remember the person who died and things they did together.”

**Q** “Can I go to the funeral?”

**A** (if you’re okay with them going) “Of course you can go to the funeral, but you don’t have to.”

**Q** “What happens after the funeral?”

**A** “People sometimes like to put flowers on the coffin or donate money to a charity as a way of remembering the person who died. After this, people often eat and drink together, and talk about the person who has died as a way of celebrating their life.”

**Q** “What is cremation?”

**A** “At the end of the funeral, some curtains will be drawn around the coffin and we will not see it again. After everyone has gone, the coffin, with the body, is put into a special, very hot oven to be turned into ash. We do not watch this bit. The ashes are then put into a special pot called an urn. Some people scatter the ashes somewhere very special to the person who has died. Or they can be buried in the ground.”

**Q** “Will it hurt?”

**A** “The person who died won’t know that they’re in a coffin or that they have been buried and if they are cremated it won’t hurt. That’s because after death their body cannot feel, hear or see.”

## **Questions about religious and spiritual beliefs**

**Q** “What happens after death?”

**A** “No one knows for certain what happens after someone dies. Different people have different ideas and beliefs although many share some of the same ones.”

**Q** “Do people have a soul? What is a soul?”

**A** “As well as a physical body, some people believe that we have a soul or spirit, which makes us who we are. They believe the soul is always there, even when our body is dead.”

**Q** “Where do you go when you die?”

**A** “Some people believe that a person’s soul or spirit goes to heaven or somewhere similar like jannah or paradise. In heaven, their body is free from pain and they are no longer ill. Other people believe that when you’re dead there is nothing more.”

**Q** “If (the person who died) is in heaven/jannah/paradise, why are they buried?”

**A** “Their body, which is the physical part that doesn’t work anymore, is buried. It’s their soul that is in heaven.”

**Q** “Can (the person who died) see me from heaven/jannah/paradise?”

**A** “Some people find it comforting to think (the person who died) is watching and looking after them from above.”

**Q** “Can I telephone heaven/jannah/paradise? Why can’t I put up an extra long ladder to heaven?”

**A** “Heaven is not like places here on earth – you cannot phone it or go there.”

**Q** “Why did God/Allah/Jehovah let (the person who died) die?”

**A** “This is a question that many grown-ups can’t answer either. People who believe in God believe that everything happens for a reason. This means there’s a bigger plan to everything that happens that only God knows about. This can be difficult for people to understand, especially when it’s so painful. Other people find it comforting.”

## **Things to say, and things not to say**

When talking to a child about death and dying, we need to try to choose our words carefully. Things like using simple and direct language, being honest, listening carefully, and trying to understand what the child means, is always a good place to start. It can be better to be led by their questions, and what they want to know.

### **Things to say**

“What do you think...?”

“No one knows for sure, but I believe that...”

“Grown-ups find that difficult too.”

“Do you understand what I mean by...?”

“What do you mean when you say...?”

### **Things to try and avoid**

“Grandma has passed away” – which sounds as if she may come back.

“People only die when they get old” – which is untrue.

“I’m sorry you’ve lost your Grandad” – which sounds as if he might be found somewhere.

“Joe has gone to sleep.” – which makes it sound as if sleeping is dangerous.

## Helpful books for children

### ***What Does Dead Mean?: A Book for Young Children to Help Explain Death and Dying*** by Caroline Jay and Jenni Thomas | 4+

This book guides children through questions they often ask about death and dying. It's suitable for children aged four and above and is an ideal book for parents and carers to read with their children. It's also suitable for teachers, therapists and counsellors working with young children.

### ***Badger's parting gifts*** by Susan Varley | 4+

Many families have found this book useful when helping children to come to terms with the death of someone close. It tells the story of Badger's peaceful death and his friends remembering what Badger taught them while he was alive.

### ***Goodbye, Mog*** by Judith Kerr | 3+

Within the series of the Mog the Cat books is Goodbye Mog. Although it's about a cat dying, Mog's tiredness and readiness to leave are beautifully expressed. Mog's expresses her continued love for her family, and the way she wants them to be happy after she's gone.

### ***No Matter What*** by Debi Gliori | 5+

A little fox is in a big bad mood, and is worried that its mother won't love it forever. In this beautiful and lyrical picture book, we see a clever and resourceful mother prove to her child that a parents love is limitless - no matter what! No Matter What is about love, going on forever, even after we're gone.

### ***Duck, Death and the Tulip*** by Wolf Erlbruch | 7+

Following a ghoulish-looking Death, who is drawn with a skull for a head, this book is so interesting, mostly because it doesn't give any answers (lots of room for discussion)! The story implies that Death is part of life, a close companion always. The writing (or rather, the translation, this book is translated from German) is beautiful. After Duck has died, Death strokes her crumpled feathers back into place.

### ***Vicky Angel*** by Jacqueline Wilson | 9+

Jade has a quirky, boisterous and confident best buddy in Vicky - but suddenly, this bubbly best friend is killed in a car accident. This unexpected event evokes shock and bewilderment in characters and readers alike. However, Vicky is such a loud and gregarious character, she's sure to find a way to continue to be part of Jade's life. This story is both enjoyable to read and provides a sensitive introduction to the concept of death for children, with Jacqueline Wilson's inimitable engaging style.

***Always and Forever*** by Alan Durant | 3+

When Fox passes away, everyone is distraught. Mole, Otter and Hare don't know how they'll go on without their beloved friend. But, months after Fox's passing, Squirrel reminds them all of how funny Fox used to be, and they realise that Fox will never truly be gone as he is still there in their hearts and memories. This comforting book is perfect for showing children that though loved ones may die, we can always remember the happy times we had with them.

***Michael Rosen's Sad Book*** by Michael Rosen | 5+

In this award-winning book, Michael Rosen reflects on the sadness he experienced when his 18-year-old son Eddie died. He offers uplifting insights to help young readers deal with complicated and difficult emotions, and shows children that it's okay to be sad. Featuring thoughtful illustrations by Quentin Blake, this book will comfort and soothe children after bereavement.

***I Miss You: A First Look at Death*** by Pat Thomas | 5+

This lovely picture book explores the issue of death in a simple, gentle way, explaining the feelings children will experience and answering the questions they may have about this sensitive subject. It is written by a trained psychotherapist, journalist and parent, and features sweet, colourful illustrations.

***Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine*** Winston's Wish | 5+

Produced by a children's bereavement charity, this bright book offers a structure and an outlet for children to explore the difficult feelings that follow bereavement and make sense of their experience by reflecting on different aspects of their grief. It shows them how they can find a balance between remembering their loved one and having fun.

***Bridge to Terabithia*** by Katherine Paterson | 9+

Bridge to Terabithia tells the story of Jesse and Leslie, two young misfits who don't get along at first, but soon develop a close and special bond. They embark on all sorts of fantasy adventures in the imaginary land of Terabithia in the woods, but it can only be reached by a rope-swing across a river. However, when Jesse is away one day, tragedy strikes: Leslie drowns in the river after the rope breaks. This book explores with beautiful sensitivity how Jesse copes with this tragic and sudden bereavement, proving both heart-breaking and uplifting for older children.

***Water Bugs & Dragonflies – Explaining Death to Young Children*** by Doris Stickney | 5+

This is a delightfully simple way of explaining death to children. By using the analogy of the water bugs' short life underwater as our time on earth and their emergence as dragonflies into the bright sunlit world above the water as our life after death.