

## Why do children need to talk about death?

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.

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.

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.

## How to talk to kids about death and dying...

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. However, it 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.

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

St Clare Hospice 

Get in touch on:  
**01279 773700**

Ring our 24 hour  
advice line on:  
**01279 773773**

[stclarehospice.org.uk](http://stclarehospice.org.uk)

**The truth is  
never too young  
to talk about  
death and dying.**



## "I worry that I won't be able to handle having a conversation about death with my child – or I might say the wrong thing."

Sometimes, it is our own fears that keep us from talking about death and dying. 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 (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 may feel death is something you mustn't talk about
- 👃 They can feel their feelings are not valid
- ☀️ Their fears may be perpetuated

### 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...?"

## Talking to children about death

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.

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.

### 1. Let them lead

Be led by their questions and what they want to know.

### 2. Listen carefully

Try to understand what the child means.

### 3. Be honest

Children will know if you try to hide the truth from them.

### 4. "I don't know."

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.

### 5. Use the right words

Try to be direct and use plain language. Say 'died' and 'dead' instead of 'passed away,' 'lost' or 'gone to sleep' to avoid confusion.

## Common Q&As

Q "Are you going to die?"

A "Yes, one day. Everyone dies eventually, but it probably won't be for a long time."

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 "Is death forever?"

A "Yes. When someone dies nothing can bring them back to life."

## 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.

