

Explaining Death to Children

For Parents

Children understand death differently at each stage of development. Keep in mind that each child is unique in their development and may not fit with these age group generalizations.

- Be honest with your children or they will mistrust you when they learn the truth.
- Create an atmosphere of comfort and acceptance and encourage questions.

Age 4-7

Describing Death

Up until age 6-7, children understand things in very concrete terms. Explain that dying means the body stops working.

“Grandpa’s body stopped working and the doctors couldn’t fix it.”

“Uncle was in a car accident that made his body stop working.”

Invite them to ask you questions if they want any more information. This age child might ask questions that feel uncomfortable to some adults.

“Does he still have a penis?”

“How hot is the cremation fire?”

“Why didn’t mommy see the angel I saw?”

If there are questions that you don’t know the answers to, find the answers so the child trusts you will help them understand no matter what happens.

Before you answer their question, however, ask them what they think about it. This will ensure you are answering the right question.

Child: “Where is Grandpa now?”

Parent: “He’s in heaven.”

Child: “That was heaven where we all sat outside in chairs by the big box?”

If your family’s spiritual beliefs include having a body and a spirit, you can describe death by getting out a glove. Put your hand (spirit) in it and explain that as long as your hand is in the glove (body), it can do all sorts of things like tickle people, clap, count with the fingers, etc., but once your hand comes out of the glove, the glove can no longer do anything by itself.

Cause of Death & Permanence

Children this age don't understand what makes things die, or that death is permanent. This is very normal.

"I made Daddy die because I didn't bake him cookies that night."

"It's OK Mom, don't be sad; Grandma will come back for my birthday party."

They will need to reach a new stage of development to understand things differently.

Avoid Euphemisms

Use the words "die" and "death" so the children can begin to understand what that means.

- If you say, "We lost her," the child might wonder why you're not out looking for her.
- If you say, "He died in his sleep," the child might be afraid to go to sleep.
- If you say, "She went to be with Jesus," the child might think it's just a temporary visit.

Ages 7-11

By this age, children have a more realistic understanding of death. They are starting to understand that death is permanent and they are often curious about the physical process of dying or being dead. This sometimes leads to them becoming worried about their own aches and pains.

They tend to think of ghosts, boogymen, skeletons, and angels when they think of death.

They need more complete information and they may have more specific questions. Invite them to ask about anything they are wondering about and do your best to answer their questions thoroughly.

Teens

Most teens understand that death is permanent and that everyone dies. Many will feel angry or betrayed if they don't receive all the available information about a terminal illness or death, so talk to them frequently and honestly.

Many teens look for support more from friends than parents and they may begin to do risky things (e.g., driving fast or accepting dangerous dares) to prove that death can't happen to them.

Some feel alone after a death because they no longer fit in with their peers but it may be difficult to communicate with their parents. They may struggle with wanting to be independent, yet really needing more affection and attention from their parents.