

How Do I Answer a Child's Questions About Death?"

When Should I tell my child?

- As soon as possible – They may see others grieving or hear about the loss before you have the chance to explain it

What Details should I share?

- Be open and honest
- Use appropriate language, and simple explanations: "He was sick/hurt, couldn't get better, and he died."
- Avoid phrases such as "passed away", they may confuse the child
- If you aren't emotionally able to answer, it is okay to tell child "I don't know how to answer that question right now, but I'll get back to you"

"Who will take care of me now?"

- Make them feel loved and safe
- Maintain a routine and structure to show child those taking care of them are okay and managing
- Remind them of everyone they know who loves them and will be helping them
- Reassure them that a plan for their love and care is being made

"What happens to a person when they die?"

- "Their body stops working. They don't breathe, talk eat, feel cold or pain."
- "We won't be able to see them anymore"
- "We will always have their memories and love we shared forever in our hearts"
- "It is a sad time, but we will be okay"
- Talk about any spiritual beliefs about death

Should I take my child to the viewing/funeral services?

- Do not force them, let them choose if they are ready
- Consider their age, family religious beliefs, feelings and experiences.
- Participation in goodbye ritual is generally good for child
- Prepare them for what they will see, for both the loved one, and the emotions of relatives
- Helpful to have child write letter/draw picture for loved one
- If child is not attending, have them take part in planning – choose flowers or a song to be played

How do I explain burial or cremation to a child?

- Talk about spiritual/religious meanings.
- **Burial:** Explain the memorial service, and explain that at the end, the loved one gets placed in a beautiful casket, and placed in a big hole in the ground, and will be covered with dirt, and eventually grass will grow over them. Discuss that there will be a big stone to mark the location so they can come to visit and spend time there to think about and remember their loved one. It will be a special place
- **Cremation:** Explain that it is a special heat process that turns the body into soft ashes that can be placed in a beautiful urn. It does not hurt. Some families place the urn in a mausoleum so other family members and friends can come visit. Some families keep the loved one in their home to keep them close. Others scatter the ashes in the loved one's favorite place

Should I try not to cry in front of my children?

- It is healthy, and normal to cry in front of children
- Not a sign of weakness, it is evidence of your connection to your loved one
- Reassure them that crying is how you get the sadness out, and that you will be okay

What do I say to them when they talk about wanting to die so they can be with them?

- Justify their longing for loved one
- Talk about afterlife if included in your religious beliefs/spirituality
- Loved one wants them to live happy, long life
- Encourage them to talk to you when they feel that way
- Speak to a mental health professional if it continues/becomes serious

What should I tell them if they cry out for them?

- “I miss them too.”
- Validate their desire to be with the person, and how sad that you can’t be
- Be a comforting presence – this is important for a grieving child, more than words
- “Most people live to an old age – but sometimes, they don’t. And that’s okay.”
- “I expect to live for many years.” (Avoid making promises on how long you’ll live.)
- Reassure the child that they will always be cared for, no matter what

What should I tell the school?

- Give a simple, accurate explanation of what happened, and how long child will be gone
- After service and memorial are over, discuss accommodations child may need
- Let school know as soon as possible if you want to choose how community is notified

“What am I supposed to say to my friends if they ask what happened?”

- “I really don’t feel like talking about it today.”
- “I appreciate your concern, but I’m having a hard day.”
- It’s a private time for me and my family right now.”
- If children hear rumors or statements of “I heard...”, tell child to trust they will hear the truth from you. “If you hear information that is different from what I told you, please tell me so I can correct or confirm what you’ve heard.”

How do we handle when other children say mean or inappropriate things about the loss?

- “Children sometimes say things or ask questions that they don’t realize are hurtful. It’s okay to tell others you don’t want to talk about it.”
- If child wants to say something in return, suggest “Everything being said isn’t all true.”
- Grief has many layers – help child feel comfortable during their grieving
- Give them an escape from being a traumatic center of attention through love, sports, church activities, reading, music, or drawing