

How to support young children in relation to death and bereavement

By Tamsin Grimmer, Early Years Director of Linden Learning.

It is difficult to know if and how we should discuss death with young children. Should we try to shelter them from the situation by avoiding talking about it or should we talk about it in a manner which our young children will understand?

Tamsin Grimmer shares her ideas about how parents/carers of young children should be responding if someone they know and love dies.

Sadly, death is a part of life and one day our children will lose a loved one. We need to be prepared to talk with our children about death and what this means. Death is a very abstract concept and talking in terms of concrete things that children might understand can help. For example, "When we are dead we do not breathe, our heart stops beating and we cannot play anymore." Whether or not you are religious might also have an impact on how you want to talk about it. In my Christian tradition, we believe in Heaven so when talking with my own children about death I have referred to this, however, it is important that we do not confuse children with the phrases we use. So try to avoid using analogies like 'falling asleep' or 'at rest'. These are confusing for young children and can lead to them becoming frightened of resting or sleeping themselves. Instead, we should factually explain about life cycles and that every living thing will die one day. We can reassure them that we might feel sad and miss the person who died, but we have lots of lovely, happy memories that we can share, and possibly photographs to look at to help us to remember their life. We also need to ensure that we offer plenty of opportunities for the child to talk about how they feel, but if they don't want to talk, don't make them.



Reassure children that they are still loved

Key principles when supporting children with bereavement:

- Be as honest as possible with your child and use terms that are factual and portray information, avoiding the potential for misunderstandings. Use correct language, e.g. dead, death, dying, died, buried etc. and encourage your child to have their own narrative about it.
- Remember that a bereavement brings children a lot of uncertainty, so try to ensure that changes in your home are kept to a minimum. Familiar surroundings can help a child to remain feeling safe and secure.
- Never be offended or affronted by the directness of a young child's questions and comments. They are trying to fathom the unfathomable and we need to remain sensitive to their needs, even if they appear to be insensitive themselves.
- Children's behaviour may regress after a bereavement, for example by wetting themselves, thumb sucking or becoming excessively clingy to a carer. We must offer understanding, reassurance and security at this time and not chastise these behaviours. They will pass with time as the child feels more safe and secure.
- Family rituals around death should be explained to children and, whenever possible, children should be given the choice about attending services of remembrance, funerals, burials and cremations.

If you have found this leaflet useful, please do get in touch.

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Top Tips

Some ideas of how to appropriately support children in thinking about death include:

- ✓ Have an ethos of permission in your home so that words like 'dead' and 'die' are not banned from your vocabulary but instead prompt discussion.
- ✓ Answer any questions about the death as honestly as possible, remembering that it's OK to say, "I don't know!" Don't worry if your child asks the same questions over and over again. They are trying to reassure themselves and we must answer consistently each time as this will offer the reassurance they are seeking.
- ✓ Don't talk about death or the person who has died over children's heads - instead include the child in the conversation.
- ✓ Do not avoid talking about your loved one or hide your own grief. Try to be honest about how you feel and why, e.g. "I am crying because I am sad. I am sad because Granddad has died and I won't see him again. Can you give me a cuddle and perhaps we can talk about our favourite things we used to do with him."
- ✓ Use playful interactions as a means of exploring death, for example, play at doctors and nurses or superheroes.
- ✓ Read stories and books which include death or deal with bereavement and grief, (e.g. *Waterbugs and Dragonflies* by D. Stickney, *The Invisible String*, by P. Karst.)
- ✓ Storytelling – make up stories in which a character dies or undergoes changes, or provide opportunities for children to make up their own stories.
- ✓ Introduce children to the idea of life cycles, for example butterflies. You could even raise some tadpoles from frogspawn or butterflies from caterpillars.
- ✓ Think about changes over time in the natural world e.g. growth and decay.
- ✓ Share some memories about your loved one, perhaps light a candle, look at some photos and reminisce about the good times you shared together.

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