

talking to your child about death

There has been a death in your family, and you see a deep sadness in your child. When you see your child grieve like this, you wonder how you can best comfort and support her or him.

Today children have to be told about death.

In the past, when people were born and died at home, death was a natural part of everyday life and children took part in that event with everybody else. Also more people lived on farms and witnessed the birth and death of animals. This helped children understand the cycle of life.

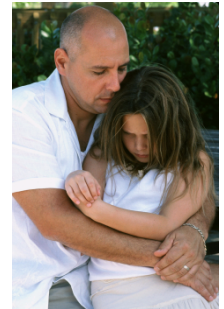
If possible, teach your child about death before the death takes place.



An understanding of what death means does not enter a child's picture of the world by itself. In most families, parents don't think about explaining death to their children until a person or a pet dies. Children can be taught that death is a part of life when parents prepare them for an expected death in the family.

Sorrow and death are much easier for a child to deal with when they know something about it beforehand.

By making preparation a part of everyday life, the reality of death can be a natural thing for a child. Flowers that wither and die, or an animal that dies, may provide an opening for a discussion. It is possible to talk about elderly people whom the child knows while you talk about yourselves getting old and dying. To help the talk, your local library can provide a list of children's books on the subject.



Talking to your child after a death takes place:

When a family member dies, children react differently than adults. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible. Children between five and nine begin to think more like adults about death, yet they may still believe that it will never happen to them or anyone they know. During the weeks that follow the death, it is normal for some children to continue believing that the family member is still alive.

Children do not need protection from death. Be honest about death and about sorrow.



When your child is protected against sorrow, they will still react when they realize what has happened. No one can avoid grief; we can only postpone it. Trying to protect a child by not telling them of the death may cause them unnecessary anxiety and perhaps even guilt.

Once your child has accepted the death, she or he may display feelings of sadness often and over a long period of time, and at unexpected moments. It is recommended that the family spend as much time as possible with the child, reassuring the child that she or he has permission to show feelings openly and freely. Young

children tend to “talk” about their grief through the medium of play.

Anger is a natural reaction for some children when the person who has died was essential to their sense of security. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards family members.

Children need competent guidance and satisfactory answers to their questions.

Listen carefully when a child asks a question. Make sure you understand what they want to know. Answer their questions. If your child asks “Am I going to die?” explain that they will, but not for a long