

Talking to Children About Death and Grief

Information for Parents and Caregivers

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here:
<https://library.nshealth.ca/Patients-Guides>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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Talking to Children About Death and Grief

When you are caring for a grieving child, you may sometimes feel like you do not know how to help them. It can be painful to see their sadness, but you can help. If you try to connect with your child, then you can help them through grief and loss.

Children grieve in different ways. This will depend on:

- › Their stage of emotional development
- › Their past experiences with loss
- › How much support they get from their family and caregivers

It is natural and normal for a child to grieve. It helps when they have a lot of support and encouragement from their family and friends. Making time to care for your own grief will help you support your child.

It is important for children of this age to hear that **grief is a normal and healthy human response**, even though it is very painful. Grief is not a mental illness. Support your child as much as you can to reach out to their community for the care and support that they need.

Online resources

- KidsGrief.ca: Canadian Virtual Hospice
 - › www.kidsgrief.ca
- Children and Youth Grief Network
 - › www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com
- Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children and Families
 - › www.dougy.org
- Andrea Warnick Consulting: Supporting Grieving Children, Youth, and Adults, through Education and Counselling
 - › <https://andreawarnick.com>

This pamphlet is just a guide. If you have questions, please talk to your health care provider. We are here to help you.

Pre-teens to teenagers

By this age, children understand that death is final and that every person eventually dies. There may still be denial at times, but this is a normal part of adult grief too. It may help to talk about the details of dying. Children of this age are curious and will appreciate straightforward facts (like what happens to the person's body when they die, whether the person was in pain, what the person's body looks and feels like, and what will happen to their body at the funeral home, or through cremation or burial). You may want to ask your child to help with funeral or celebration of life gatherings. Talking about the death and involving them can help them better understand their experience.

Children of this age are still developing emotional awareness. They have more organized feelings, but they may not always trust them or want to share them. They will watch others closely for signs about what to feel and how to grieve. Help them express their feelings by gently encouraging them to talk and share.

How can I help?

Children learn how to grieve by watching adults grieve. Children are flexible and open to new experiences. They will learn from you. If you keep them away from death or do not include them in grief, they may think that death and grief are not important.

Talking with children about death and grief will help to address their fears. Let them know that their questions are normal. Answer their questions truthfully, as much as possible.

It is common for adults to want to protect children from grief and strong emotions. This is not always helpful. For example, if you need to tell your child that their mom is going to die, you may be scared you will start to cry or get overwhelmed. It is OK for children to see adults cry.

Children are not hurt by seeing strong emotions. **It is OK to tell them that you are sad. This lets them know that it is OK to be sad.** They will learn from this and may have their own strong emotions to share.

Children Coping with Disease and Dying

There are some common concerns that children may have when somebody they care about is very sick or dying, or has died. KidsGrief.ca refers to these as the 4Cs:

- > Can I CATCH it?
- > Did I CAUSE it?
- > Can I CURE it?
- > Who will take CARE of me?

Your child may not bring up these concerns on their own, so it is important that you talk with them.

When someone is very sick

Children are curious and full of questions about disease and death. Keep them updated on the basic details of how a loved one is doing.

Children are aware when their parents or caregivers are upset. They notice how their parents act, their body language, and their tone of voice. Children often pick up on traces of adult worry and concern.

Tell your child about the person's health changes. Let them know that these changes are caused by the disease and its treatments. Use clear, simple words to explain each new change.

Avoid using words that the child may not understand, like 'terminally ill' or 'passed on'. Unlike younger children, school aged children may stay focused on the disease or death of a family member. They can be easily overwhelmed by their emotions. The sadness, anger, anxiety, or guilt that they may feel about a loved one's disease usually shows up as a change in their behaviour.

For example, you may notice that a confident child is now anxious and resistant, and cries and has stomachaches when you take them to school. Talk to your child's teacher about helping them express their feelings and making sure they feel safe when you are not with them.

It is common for children of this age to feel rejected and unloved if you take time and energy away from them to care for a loved one. Since you may not be able to help this, it is important that you spend special time alone with your child each day. Tell them often why you are leaving them.

Include your child in your grief process. Show and tell them how you are feeling and what you do with your grief. This will help them to understand their own feelings and how to express them.

At this age, children are anxious when they are not with their parents or caregivers. They may think that they are the reason a parent, caregiver, or adult is upset. They need reassurance. Carefully and calmly explain what you are feeling and why.

At this age, children tend to have little contact with people and groups outside of their family. When someone in the family is sick, this often means that your child will visit new places (like a hospital) and meet new people (like doctors and nurses). Always ask them if they have questions.

There are books and toys that you can use to help your child learn about these new situations (see Online resources on page 17). You can also contact the Palliative Care Bereavement Coordinator (Central Zone) for more resources.

- › Phone: 902-473-1622

School aged children

Some children in this age group will be able to understand cause and effect. But most will still think of themselves as the centre of most things they experience.

Children of this age usually feel free to express their emotions. Drawings, short stories, and playing can help your child understand more about the disease or death and how they feel about it.

Giving children honest information regularly can help them understand what they are seeing and hearing.

Talk about the things that your child might notice. They might see weight loss, changes in skin colour, or hair loss. They might hear coughing, or people awake at night, or see that the person is confused. They may wonder whether the person will get better or not. Talk with your child as things change. Be honest with them about what the changes mean.

Family visits at the hospital or hospice

Sometimes, the excitement and energy of a child can be tiring or overwhelming. Plan for your child to have something to do during the visit. They can share quiet toys, drawing paper, and other simple activities with the person you are visiting. Your child may wish to share their favourite take-out lunch or dinner with the person. Be ready to leave when your child's mood or behaviour shows you that they are ready to go. It can help to choose a trusted person who can be with your child while you are at the hospital.

Make time to talk

When someone you love is very sick, it can be hard to find time to talk about it with your child. Children do not always have the words they need to tell adults about their feelings and questions. Make time to talk with your child. For example, you may find you can check on how your child is doing while snuggling at bedtime. Mealtimes or car rides may also be good times for these talks.

Since many children will avoid asking questions because they are scared of upsetting others or making the situation worse, it is important that you start and continue these discussions.

What are your questions?

Please ask. We are here to help you.

Ask for the support of important adults in your child's life, like a teacher, principal, coach, or group leader. Let them know that your child is grieving.

As children grow older, they start to look to other adults, as well as their parents, to give them a sense of well-being, self-esteem, and security. Let the important people in your child's life know about the death. They can help your child deal with the awkwardness and curiosity of other children and adults.

Tips for developmental stages

Pre-school aged children

At this age, children see themselves as the centre of most things they experience. They believe that their thoughts and behaviour are the cause of events.

If your child sees that you are very upset, they may think that they are the cause of your grief. You can help your child feel less anxious by explaining carefully and often that this is not the case.

If your child complains of these symptoms, they need loving attention, patience, and understanding. Reassure them that you are both healthy and that you do not have the same disease or condition as the person who died.

If your child is very angry, you may want to do something active like playing soccer or tag together. If they are sad, you might talk about the person who died or look at pictures together. If their anxiety does not seem to get better with time and attention, bring them to visit their primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner). These moments may be even harder for you because of your own grief.

Be sure to give yourself the time and space you need to grieve. This will help you to support your child as they grieve. Remember to express and share your emotions and questions with other adults.

Children Coping with the Death of a Loved One

Should children be around when someone is dying?

As a parent, you can choose how much your child is involved when the person is dying. If your child cannot be there, try including them in a video call, or taking photos for your child. Let them know that showing how they feel is OK, and that they should not try to hide their grief.

It is usually OK for children to be present for dying and death. Some ways to include them are:

- › Making the dying person a card
- › Holding hands with the dying person
- › Placing a blanket on the dying person
- › Singing them a song, talking with them, or simply being there while they play on their own

Be ready to answer questions your child may have.

It can be painful, sad, and scary. But most children and teens quickly adjust to knowing that their loved one is dying. Many children are comfortable climbing right onto the bed and cuddling up with their dying family member. It is OK for children to be there for the last breath. It can teach them about what it means to be human. If your child was not there at the time of death, tell them what has happened soon after the death.

Some children may worry about being around a dying loved one. They may not want to be there when the person is dying. You do not need to force them to be there. It is good to talk openly with your child about their feelings so that they feel understood.

Children often have mistaken ideas about death or are afraid of what they do not know. By talking about the dying process, death, and what happens to a person's body after they die, you may find that your child is more open and curious about death.

Being around dying and death can help children to feel better about grief and loss later in life.

It is normal for your child to show grief in short bursts, followed by happier activities. They may have sudden outbursts of anger, guilt, or fear. When this happens, let your child show their feelings and help them find safe ways to express them.

A grieving child may be demanding. This can show up as sulking, clinging, or misbehaving. This is normal. Reassure, nurture, and encourage your child. Be aware that this behaviour will tend to be worse at home, and directed at you if you are the remaining parent or caregiver. If you need help, ask other parents that you respect, or teachers, coaches, or school counsellors for help. Ask the social worker on your care team about resources you can use.

Children get anxious about disease and dying

After a death in the family, children are curious and concerned about death. Your child may ask about whether or when other people in their life will die. They will likely be concerned about their own death or yours. This fear often shows up in your child's body. They may complain of symptoms similar to the person who died, like headaches or stomach pain.

For example, if you both talk openly about the person who died, sharing your memories and feelings, your child will know they are not responsible for the sadness that you both feel. Ask your child where they feel sadness in their body. Help them find the physical pain and sensation (feeling). Invite them to draw a picture of their body and the pain feelings inside it.

Keep reminders of your loved one

Keep objects or pictures of the person who died available to your child. These often provide comfort. For example, if your child's grandpa died, they may want to keep a special picture of him in their room or wear his slippers. It can be helpful to find a way to remember grandpa on birthdays or special holidays. Find out what helps your child feel connected to the person they lost.

A child's grief is different from an adult's

Remember that your child's way of grieving will be very different from your own. Children often live in the moment. Some children will want to talk about the death, while others will want to be left alone. Some may stay busy, and others may withdraw from all activities. Children often will not realize the full extent of the loss right away.

Children and Grief

Telling a child that someone has died

Use plain, simple language when telling a child that someone has died.

- › Say things like, 'Their heart doesn't beat, their ears don't hear, and their body doesn't move anymore.'
- › Tell them that the person cannot feel anything anymore.
- › Explain that the person who died will not be coming back to life.
- › There is nothing wrong with saying things that reflect your beliefs about what happens after death. Children also need facts about the person's body and what happens to it when they die.
- › Avoid comparing death to sleep.
- › Answer any questions they may have, like "Were they in pain?"
- › Children often think of the body as being separate from the head. When talking about the person's body, make sure they understand that it includes the head.

It may help to talk about a past loss that the child remembers, like the death of a pet or another person. This will help to show them that dead people do not come back.

It can also help for the child to see the person after death. It will help them understand that when someone dies, their body stops working. **Seeing their dead loved one will also help your child to be less afraid of death later in life.** It teaches them that death is a natural and normal part of living.

Getting ready for rituals and funerals

Some parents choose not to include their children in funerals and celebrations. Others may feel good about including them. They can be included in choosing a casket, clothing, or flowers, and in the service itself. Some children may want to speak or write, make a piece of art, sing a song, or be part of the service in some other way.

Before attending the visitation, funeral, memorial service, or wake, explain to your child what will happen, who will be there, and how people may act (tears, sobbing, sadness). Explain what role, if any, your child will have. It is good to include your child in rituals, if possible. You know your child best and can decide how involved they will be.

If there will be an open casket at the service, you can explain to your child that:

- › their loved one’s body will be there so that people can say goodbye to them.
- › the casket will be used to bury the body in the ground.

If the person was cremated, you can talk about that process and what will happen to the person’s ashes.

Continuing to talk with your child about their loved one who died

Grief does not follow a timeline or a schedule. It is not something that we “get over” or that “resolves”. This applies to both children and adults.

Grief changes who we are. There is no cure for grief. No matter what you do, you cannot take away your child’s grief.

Children will need to talk about their feelings and thoughts long after the death. If you do not talk about your loss, your child probably will not either. **If you keep talking about the person who died and how you and your child are feeling, it will help them to understand and accept their loss.**