

Explaining Death to Young Children

It is best to explain death to young children in simple, concrete terms.

- “Being dead means that Grandpa’s body doesn’t work any more. He can’t walk, or talk, or eat anymore. We won’t see him anymore, but we will always remember the fun things we did together.”
- “There was a bad car wreck and Adam was hurt. The police officers and firemen tried very hard to help him, but he was hurt too badly and he died. That means his body doesn’t work anymore...”

Young children do not understand that death is permanent. They may ask you over and over again when the person who died is coming back. Be patient with them even if this brings up sad feelings for you.

Young children personalize death. They may ask “Who will take care of me if you die.” Answer this question honestly. Reassure your child that someone will always love and take care of them no matter what happens, but that most people live until they are old. You expect to be able to take care of them for a long time.

Young children have magical thinking. They believe their thoughts and feelings cause things to happen. If they were mad at the person who died, or if they argued with the person who died, they may believe that these feelings or behaviors caused the death. It is important to reassure them that nothing they thought, said, or did caused the person to die.

Do not use euphemisms to explain death to young children. This can frighten and confuse them. For example:

- If you say, “Uncle Tyrone is sleeping,” or he is “resting in peace,” the child may be afraid that if he goes to sleep, he won’t wake up.
- If you say, “Grandpa was very sick and died,” the child may worry that if they get sick with a cold or flu they will die too. It is important to tell young children that most of the time when we get sick we get better in a few days.

Be careful about using religious terms to explain death to young children. Words that comfort an adult can be very confusing to young children.

- If you say, “Mara was such a good little girl that God wanted her to live with him,” the child may wonder, “If I am good, will God take me too? Should I act badly so I can stay with Mommy and Daddy?”
- If you say, “It is God’s will that Mara died,” the child may wonder why God wants to make everyone so sad.
- If you say, “Mara is happy now that she is living in heaven with God,” the child can be confused about why everyone they see looks so sad if Mara is happy.

Explaining funerals or cremations to young children is difficult. With both burials and cremations, it is important to explain that after we die, we don’t need our bodies anymore. Our bodies don’t think or feel after we die. Most people’s bodies are either put in the ground (buried) or cremated (placed in a very hot place until the body turns into ashes). Then the family can scatter the ashes as a way of remembering the person who died. (It is best not to explain cremation as ‘burning’ the body.) This can be frightening to young children because they associate a burn as something that hurts.”

If young children accompany you to a memorial service, it is important to explain what will happen ahead of time. Seeing someone in an open casket can be very frightening to a young child. If you take your children with you, prepare them ahead of time for what they will see, hear, etc. Help your child do something to remember the person who died. They might draw a picture or plant a flower.

Keep your child’s structure and daily routine as normal as possible. Children grieve differently from adults. They can be sad and tearful at one moment and happy and playing with friends the next moment. This is normal. The child is not being disrespectful of your feelings or the person who died if they are not sad all the time.

Remember to take good care of yourself during this time. Be sure to ask for support from neighbors, friends, and family. You are the most important person in your child’s life. Taking good care of yourself is one of the best things you can do for your child.