



## How to Talk to Children about Death and Dying

- Tell children the truth in simple, clear and concrete terms.
  - It is important to use terms such as “dead” and “dying.” Avoid saying things like “he is sleeping” when talking about death. A child may think that the child that has died will “wake up,” or they may be afraid of going to sleep themselves.
- Repeat answers if a child asks the same questions.
  - Children may ask the same question many times as they test the reality and finality of death. Ask grandparents, friends and other adults the child trusts to give the same answers.
- Share your feelings.
  - Children are very perceptive. If you are not honest with them, they will sense that there is something wrong. They may think that they did something to make you sad. They need to hear how you are feeling and be told that they did nothing to cause your sadness. They also need to be told that they did not do anything to cause the death that occurred.
- You know your children best. Use your judgment as to their needs.
  - These are incredibly difficult conversations to have but are important for the child to heal. They need to be given a choice on their inclusion in the memorial service and in having an opportunity to say goodbye to their loved one. Many children want and need to be close to their parents during this difficult time.

## What to Expect as Your Child Grieves

Children at different stages may have separate and unique reactions to the death of a child. Here are a few common reactions and ways of coping for children at different ages:

- Ages 2-5 years
  - Grief Response:
    - Confused
    - May be agitated at night or afraid to go to sleep
    - Knows that a big thing has happened, but may not understand
    - May act as though nothing has happened
    - Asks questions again and again



- Ways of Coping:
  - Reassure them that things are okay
  - Provide simple, honest answers to questions
  - Make home a secure, loving place
  - Spend time with your child drawing, reading or playing
  - Include in the funeral, as much as you feel is okay
- Ages 5-8 years
  - Grief Response:
    - Want to understand death in a more concrete way
    - Express denial, anger or sorrow
    - May believe that the death was caused by something bad that they did or thought
    - May act as though nothing has happened
    - Repeats the same questions
  - Ways of Coping:
    - Provide simple, honest answers to questions
    - Provide a physical outlet for your child's grief (crying, running, etc.)
    - Offer hope about the future
    - Spend time with your child drawing, reading or playing
    - Include in funeral rituals as much as you feel is okay
- Ages 8-12 years
  - Grief Response:
    - Expresses shock, denial, anger or sorrow
    - Has changes in habits such as sleeping, eating or bed wetting, etc.
    - Tries to cope alone
    - Has morbid curiosity (wants to know details about death and dying)
  - Ways of Coping:
    - Provide simple, honest answers to questions
    - Offer hope about the future
    - Create times to talk about feelings and questions
    - Encourage reading
    - Provide a physical outlet for your child's grief
    - Include in funeral rituals as much as you feel is okay



- Ages 12-18 years
  - Grief Response:
    - Expresses shock, anger or distress
    - Becomes depressed or withdrawn
    - Reacts like adults, but may have fewer coping skills
    - Feels isolated, especially from peers
  - Ways of Coping:
    - Allow and encourage them to express their feelings
    - Allow for support from peers
    - Suggest getting into a support group
    - Seek support from other adults
    - Maintain a stable home environment
    - Include in funeral rituals as much as you feel is okay