



Death and Grief

Death is the end of life. It is when the heart stops beating the brain stops thinking, and the body can no longer see, hear, smell, touch, taste, or breath. Grief is the process of separating from someone or something important to you, and yet holding on to some connection. Grief or mourning can bring intense feelings and difficult emotions. Having a conversation with children about death and dying may be difficult for parents and caregivers.

- It is common for young children to have no immediate reaction to a death and may take them a while to fully understand that the person is gone forever.
- Children are likely to go through the 5 stages of grief much like an adult: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.
- A child may be experiencing denial by behaving like nothing has happened. The loss may be too much for them to process in a short amount of time.
- It is common for a child to be angry at adults or the person who died and could wish for things to go back to the way they were before.
- Children can feel guilt or shame by believing they may have caused the death or think that there is something wrong with themselves because of it.
- A child can experience intense sadness, anxiety, or depression, which may include loss of appetite, feeling tired, feeling sick, or have difficulty concentrating.
- A child may experience panic behaviors by wondering about their own death or deaths of their loved ones.
- It is common for a child to regress in behaviors such as security blankets or bedwetting.
- Children might fantasize or long for things to be the way before and wishing for that person to come back.
- Children will reach the acceptance stage by feeling sad over the loss but getting back to feeling good about themselves and life.



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- Children who experience the loss of a loved one may experience intense and difficult emotions. It is OK to let children know that a parents or caregiver do not know everything, but you still need to give them an honest answer. While it is difficult to explain exactly what has happened, experts suggest using direct terms when explaining a death to a child such as “dead” or “died”. Avoid using terms such as “eternal sleep” or “lost someone”, the child may be afraid to go to sleep at night or might “search” for the lost person. Check back with the child to see what they have heard and understood. Give children multiple opportunities to talk about their thoughts and feelings by continuously checking in with them about the death.
- Prepare children for death by introducing the concept to them early in life. Take advantage of daily situations in life in which you can explain death: a dead plant, animal, or a character in a story or movie. Explain to the child that there is a beginning and ending to everything that is alive, everything in between is living. Show children what a life cycle may look like and explain that some lifetimes can last for a few weeks, a few years, many years, or hundreds of years.
- Allow children to see that yourself or other adults experience grief as well. It is OK to cry and show your own emotions and sadness around a child. Demonstrate how you are coping by crying, talking with friends, or remembering the good things about the person who has died. Try to avoid forcing the conversation and invite the child to talk on several occasions over time.
- Give children the option to attend a funeral if they don’t appear to be afraid, they are able to understand what it is for, and if they want to go. Funerals are a time to say good-bye and letting the child be a part of that ceremony may comfort them and help to work through their grief. Be sure to check in with the child during and after the service to answer any questions they may have and provide comfort. If attending the funeral is not a good fit, try drawing a picture together and ask if they have any favorite memories with the person who died they would like to talk about.



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