

A RESOURCE
FROM
NAGC
MEMBERS



National Alliance for
Grieving Children

TALKING TO A CHILD OR TEEN TO LET THEM KNOW SOMEONE HAS DIED

GRIEF *talk*

JOIN THE CONVERSATION: #GRIEFTALK



Grief Talk is an initiative of the NAGC launched in the summer of 2020 aimed at encouraging and supporting honest conversations around the topics of death and grief. This initiative has produced the following resources:

- Talking to Children About Death and Dying*
- Talking to a Child or Teen to Let them Know Someone has Died*
- Talking about End of Life Memorials and Rituals*
- Talking about Grieving as a Family*

Visit ChildrenGrieve.org to find these and other resources.

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Introduction

Telling a child that someone they love has died is a painful task that we all hope we never have to deal with. Unfortunately, as death is a part of life, we are likely as caregivers to find ourselves in this role. As with any challenging conversation, this presents opportunities to deliver the news in a way that strengthens our relationship with the child and leaves them feeling safe, secure, and nurtured.

Before the Conversation

Resist the urge to protect the child from the pain of the loss by avoiding the conversation. Children deserve honesty, especially with the difficult conversations, and honesty is critical to sustaining the trust between you as the child grows. Children must learn the news of a death in an intentional and direct conversation with a trusted parent or adult.



REMINDER: Children deserve honesty.



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understanding of the death. Distinguish between the facts of the death and your beliefs.

Anticipate your child's reaction and response to the news. Expect the possibility that your child may not react in a way that you expected. Expect questions and prepare for how you might answer them.

Plan for the location, timing, and setting of the conversation. Ask yourself, "How can I arrange the environment to offer the most comfort for my child?" and "Who should be present to provide support for both my child and me?"

Pay attention to your own emotional state. If possible, allow time and space to gather your thoughts so you will be better able to role-model calmness to reassure your child that they and you are okay even if you don't feel okay right now. Deep breathing, relaxation, and meditation exercises are helpful self-care activities.

Consider your child's age and development. Plan ahead language that will aid in your child's

In preparation, gather:

- Items such as blankets or stuffed animals that help your child feel secure and comforted.
- Children's books about death, dying, grief, and loss that can be used to help you start the conversation.
- Playdough, art supplies, or toys to occupy their hands to help them cope during the conversation and allow your child to express their feelings after the conversation.

Having the Conversation

After preparing yourself for the conversation, think about any internal barriers that you might be experiencing that may hinder communication.



It's okay to be emotional during the conversation.

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Children are very perceptive when it comes to noticing non-verbal messages from adults. They will pick up when you are emotional, so don't be afraid of showing them the emotion.

As you are speaking with your child:

- **Take your time.** Pauses can help reflect on a child's response and your emotions.
- **Use direct language** such as death, died, etc. and provide simple and brief explanations and simple examples that are easy for them to understand.
- **Review their understanding** of death as well as sharing your views on death.
- **Answer any question** that your child may ask and say, "I don't know" to the questions you don't know how to answer.



It's also important to normalize their feelings no matter what they are. Explain to them that it's okay to feel sad, scared, confused, etc. You can offer support by sharing how you are feeling. Share your sadness with the child and a way of coping. It gives a child permission to express their feelings, and that sadness will come and go.

Educate your child on your family's rituals after the death. Encourage them to become involved if they wish. Explain to them what is going to happen over the next few days.



Remember, use direct language such as death, died, etc. and provide simple and brief explanations and simple examples that are easy for them to understand.



There may be lots of people around, and you may be tied up preparing for a ritual.

Identifying their support people is helpful, so your child will know who to go to if their parent or caregiver isn't available.

Help Say Goodbye

Another important piece of the conversation is educating your child on the importance of saying goodbye. Give them some examples, like writing a letter or drawing a picture.

After the Conversation

Remember, every child reacts differently. Some kids cry, some ask questions, and others seem not to react at all. That's okay. Stay with

your child to offer reassurance and be open to answering questions.

Children may have a number of emotions, including but not limited to shock, fear, anger, guilt, or even relief. These feelings are normal. You may find some children don't seem to show these at all. Try to reassure them that it's okay to have different feelings.

They may have behavioral problems, including trouble sleeping or finding it hard to concentrate. Children may be clingier and need more attention. They might begin to worry about losing someone else in their life. Reassure a child that they are loved and will always be cared for. It may help to rely on family members.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Children as young as two will assume care of an adult who is grieving. They do not want to cause hurt in loved ones, so their emotions are often hidden. Maintaining as much routine as possible, even a simple meal, bedtime rituals, will help children of any age be aware of their support people, feel secure, and that there is hope. Take family walks, bike rides, or just play outside.



Considerations for Young Children

(2yrs - 6yrs)

- **Conversations should be brief, honest, frequent,** and include something for a child to play with, such as figures, medical play sets, ambulance, crayons, blocks.
- **Explain that dead means the body has stopped working.** They are not “sleeping” (fear of going to sleep), have not “gone to a better place” (ie. Disneyland), are not “lost” (‘we have to go find them’).
- **At this age, death is ‘reversible.’** Use examples in nature such as flowers, a pet to demonstrate death is permanent, not only for today but every day from now on.
- **Typical ‘magical thinking’ at this age can create misconceptions.** Though adults may see it as harsh, direct, clear words: dying, death, dead, are helpful to the child. (Magical thinking is a child’s

belief that what they wish or expect can affect what happens. For example, if a child wants very much for something to happen, and it does, the child believes he or she caused it to happen.)

- **Incorporate your family's belief of afterlife.** It helps a child know where their person or the person's spirit, aura, soul, and life force is to maintain a connection.
- **Repetition of questions is normal.** At this age, they have no experience to relate the death to. It is a new concept and needs repetition for the child to learn what death means.
- **Have your child help choose a support person,** someone they know well and are very comfortable with, as a go-to when a parent or caregiver isn't available.
- **Acknowledge grief is felt in our heart and body** (tummy/body aches, sleep/eating issues, lethargy/hyperactivity, and attention issues). Activities such as yoga, controlled breathing (ie. blowing bubbles), bike riding, running, kicking a ball, going outside, and punching a pillow can help.

- **Play is a child's first language.** Play with your child during the first and the many subsequent conversations. They may not look like they are listening, but they absorb every word and sense the seriousness of the talk. They are learning about death.

Watch how death is incorporated into their play. This is normal processing and learning.

- **A child grieves in different ways at different times.** A child may adapt to the death quickly. As the child grows, grief will likely return at developmental changes, significant family/ social/school events, holidays. Developmental growth broadens the understanding of death and its impact on the child's life.





Considerations for School -Age Children (7yrs-12yrs)

- **Review the child's understanding** of the person's decline in health, leading to their death.
- **Use clear language.** The finality of death is established during this stage; concrete direct language is essential.
- **Answer questions.** There may be questions on the details of the death; provide age-appropriate information.
- **Ask the child how they want to participate:** pick out flowers, help a sibling, walk the dog, create a photo collage, draw a picture to be placed in the casket, et cetera.
- **Be truthful** to maintain trust with the child. 'I don't know' is better than incorrect information.
- **Talk about self-care** for when emotions get big; be an example of using coping techniques
- **Establish a support person** as a go-to when a parent or caregiver isn't available.



Considerations for Teenage Children

(13yrs+)

- **Provide a familiar, distraction-free environment** for the conversation about the death.
- **Help teen find support.** Teens will likely seek support from their peers, especially those who have experienced a death. Encourage their participation in peer support groups, if desired.
- **Check in with them frequently.** Parental support is very important. Briefly share your emotional status or coping method.
- **Avoid having them take on too much family responsibility.** Some teens may assume responsibility for the family beyond their abilities. Provide tasks for them to choose from to include the teen without overtaxing them.
- **Answer questions.** Teens may seek additional details and explanations; they are learning.
- **Encourage Self-Care.** Invite teens to participate in your self-care or provide a list for them to choose from (yoga, bike ride, run, sports).

SELF-CARE IS KEY

Chances are if you have to deliver bad news, it is something that is upsetting to you, as well. Stop and check-in with yourself. **One of the best ways to help your child is to care for yourself.**

- TAKE A MOMENT AFTER YOUR CONVERSATION WITH YOUR CHILD TO BREATHE AND REFLECT.
- IDENTIFY SUPPORTS THAT YOU CAN GO TO TALK ABOUT YOUR OWN GRIEF TO AVOID LEANING ON YOUR CHILD/CHILDREN TOO MUCH.
- IF YOUR FEELINGS GET TOO INTENSE, RELY ON YOUR SUPPORT TO HELP CARE FOR YOUR CHILDREN TO ENSURE THEIR NEEDS ARE MET.
- SHARING YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND MEMORIES ARE JUST A FEW WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD.



When to seek additional support

After a death, it is important to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional.



Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideation

These changes can have an impact on the griever and the other family members. When changes in behavior go unnoticed and unaddressed, this can create an imbalance within the family. Addressing these changes will help create a supportive and safe environment for each member of the family.

Sometimes members in a family may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or even another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows the griever to share their story, understand that they are not alone, validate and normalize their experience. It is important to embrace a family members' readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional support in your area by visiting [childrengrieve.org/find-support](https://www.childrengrieve.org/find-support).



Learn more at www.ChildrenGrieve.org