

## When a Loved One Dies

**W**hen a loved one dies, it is hard to know how to explain this to your children and help them cope with their grief. What children know and understand about death is different based on their age, life experiences, and individual personalities. Even though there are differences in each child's understanding and reactions to death, a few basic ground rules are helpful when having these difficult conversations. Parents can:

- Encourage questions. You can let your child know that you may not know all the answers but that asking questions is OK.
- Let your child know there is no right or wrong way to feel and that feelings may change over weeks, days, or even hours.
- Always be honest about saying the person has died.



### FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

*How to Discuss.* For children younger than 5 years, it is important to explain death in very basic and concrete terms. It may even be necessary to explain that being dead means that the body does not work anymore and this means that the person will not be coming back. Avoid using phrases like the loved one “went away” or “went to sleep” or that the person is “lost.” These phrases may make the child scared to go to sleep or scared if someone leaves the house.

*How Children May React.* Young children may ask where the person is several times over days or weeks and it is important to answer these questions in the same way each time. Young children may also become clingy or scared to go to preschool or to normal activities for a short time. Other children may act like their usual playful selves. All of these reactions are normal.

### FOR OLDER CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

*How to Discuss.* As kids get older, they understand that every living being, including plants, animals, and people, dies at some point. Older children and teens may have more questions about the meaning of life and death or about how to make healthy choices. Some families find it helpful to work with physicians, counselors, older family members, or members of their faith in discussing these questions.

*How Older Children and Adolescents May React.* Because older children have a better understanding of death, they may react by trying to avoid what caused the death. For example, if a child's friend dies in a motor vehicle collision, the child may be scared to ride in a car for a little while. It is ok to talk about how sad the accident was and discuss ways to be safe when in a car by wearing a seatbelt. Other children and teens may become sad or withdrawn or act more childish for a little while. All of these reactions are normal.

### FOR ALL CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

In most children, grief symptoms lessen with time. Children who do not show a reduction in symptoms of grief over time may need to receive counseling to help them with their prolonged grief reactions. A study in this month's *Archives* found that children who had lost a parent were more likely to engage in risky health behaviors in adolescence, so providing a strong and long-lasting support system for children is important in these situations.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Healthy Children  
<http://www.healthychildren.org/english/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/pages/Helping-Children-Cope-with-Death.aspx>

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Source: Healthy Children

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