



Leaflet # 8: Talking to children about dying

Information to help you help children understand death

What should you tell children about death?

At some time or other, all those who care for children will be faced with questions about dying. Children deserve honest answers, but as adults, we get worried about saying the wrong thing. What's the right approach?

Why children need to talk about dying

We can't protect children from death. They encounter it all the time – whether it's a mouse brought in by the cat or a grandparent dying. At an early age they can form their own beliefs around it. And although, by the age of eight, many children understand that death is permanent and happens to everyone, it can still be a struggle to get to grips with the idea, as it is for many adults.

The trouble is that if we leave children alone with fears and misunderstandings, they can grow and grow. We need to talk to children about dying so that the myths don't take over, and so that they don't feel isolated or guilty about what they think. It's much better to have helped children have an understanding of death, funerals, burial and cremation before being confronted with these things when someone close to them dies.

“The thought of my mum dying...I can’t begin to think how sad it would make me. But because she’s talked about it openly with me, I kind of feel like I can accept it.”

Addressing the subject

Talking about death and dying isn’t easy when you feel you don’t have the answers. But trying is far better than ignoring the question – you are letting the child know that it is okay to ask.

Children are never too young to talk about death and dying. Use any opportunities that arise and remember that children need to understand some practicalities too.

Take your cues from the questions they ask, or try the following:

- Talk about death as a part of life and how life and death go together.
- Use the natural world to demonstrate the way in which all things die – flowers withering, leaves falling.
- Use books to discussions about dying: there are many available for children dealing specifically with death.
- Finding a dead animal or the death of a pet can be an opportunity to start a conversation about dying. Let the child be there when it is buried, and carry out rituals like planting flowers.
- If they want to, let children come to funerals – they are a way of saying goodbye to the person who has died. Tell them what to expect.

How to talk about death with children

Children may ask practical questions instead of talking about their feelings. Sometimes these might sound strange. What’s it like inside a coffin? What does a dead body really look like? Will I be a ghost when I die? These are entirely sensible things to wonder – and it can be reassuring to a child if you discuss them, rather than dismissing them as silly.

- Listen carefully, so you know exactly what they mean.
- If you don’t know the answer, say so.

- Don't worry if you think you've answered the question badly – it's more important to the child that you've paid attention.
- Try not to look uncomfortable answering their questions – it may create the impression that talking about these things is not allowed.
- Try and answer their question as soon as they've asked it – children's attention span is limited.
- A series of short conversations is often easier than long sessions.
- Be clear and direct in your language – using phrases such as “passed away” rather than “died” can leave them confused.
- There's no harm in a child seeing that you are sad or crying if someone has died. It may help them know their own grief is acceptable.

Questions and answers

Q “Am I going to die?”

A “Everyone dies eventually, but it probably won't be for a long time.”

Q “Are you going to die?”

A “Most people die when they are old.”

Q “What does dead mean?”

A “Something or somebody that's dead doesn't move, or eat, or breathe, or do anything. They cannot feel pain, and will never wake up.”

Things to say

“What do you think...?”

“No one knows for sure, but I believe that...”

“Grown ups find that difficult too.”

Things not to say

“Granny passed away” – which sounds as if she may come back.

“People only die when they get old” – which is untrue.

“I’m sorry you’ve lost your grandmother” – which sounds as if she might be found somewhere.

“Granny has gone to sleep.” – which makes it sound as if sleeping is dangerous.

Remember:

- **You cannot stop children feeling sad – but you can support them by listening and talking.**
- **Even if you don’t know what to say, it is better to address the subject than ignore it.**
- **Children will know if you try to hide the truth from them.**
- **Children understand words very literally, and you may need check they haven’t misunderstood.**
- **Involve children in family activities including attending funerals if they want to. It’s an opportunity for them to say goodbye.**
- **Memory boxes can be a good way of helping children remember loved ones who have died.**

To find out how to get more help visit www.dyingmatters.org

or call freephone 08000 21 44 66

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This is number eight in a series of leaflets focusing on dying, death and bereavement produced by Dying Matters.

The National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC) is the umbrella charity for all those who are involved in providing, commissioning and using palliative care and hospice services in England, Wales & Northern Ireland.

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