

Talking with Children about Death

1. Let the child's questions guide the conversation.

Clarify what the child is asking and share basic information.

"What kinds of questions for you have?"

"When someone dies, it can be confusing. What have you been wondering about?"

2. Tell the truth.

Children can sometimes imagine situations that are worse than reality. Never tell a child what they will need to unlearn later.

Be honest but reassuring.

3. Use precise, concrete terms.

"His body was too sick to work anymore. His heart has stopped beating and he is not breathing anymore. He is dead."

Children tend to understand things literally so avoid clichés such as "He went to sleep" or "She went away." These explanations can cause unnecessary fears and confusion.

Be aware of the tendency for magical thinking. Reassure the child that they were not responsible for the death due to their thoughts, words or actions.

4. Be brief.

Children approach difficult concepts in small "doses." Often they will ask a question, absorb the response and then return to play all within 5 minutes.

Information will probably need to be repeated often and children will revisit the death experience in each new developmental stage.

5. Invite the child to express their feelings.

Children will experience a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, confusion, guilt and anxiety. They may even appear uninterested in what has happened. Encourage children to express their feelings in healthy ways.

Use games, art, music or play. Read stories or watch videos about death and grief. It can be less threatening to discuss the experience from a third person perspective.

6. Share your own beliefs, feelings, and experiences.

Children will take their cues about dealing with death from the response of adults around them. Model healthy, appropriate ways to express feelings. Share faith or beliefs that bring comfort.

Our Mission

Hospice of Washington County, Inc.
compassionately serves our community by providing
palliative and end-of-life care to patients and loved ones,
as well as grief support for those coping with a life-changing loss.

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