

Talking with children about dying and death



Many people hesitate to talk with children about death, but it is an inescapable part of life. By talking to our children about death and dying, we discover what they know, if they have misconceptions, fears or worries. Let children know it's ok to talk about death.

What we say about death to children depends on their age and experience. Know that children are, on some level, aware of death through seeing dead birds, pets and insects, seeing it on tv or computers. (See info sheet on Children's developmental stages in understanding of death.)

Children can prepare and build resilience if we talk with them about death. Death is a natural ending to the life of every living thing. To cope with the sadness of death, caring for one another, being honest, and by just 'being there' can all help.

Very young children may feel everything is their fault. Reassure them often that it is not, both verbally and with hugs. Also give children lots of reassurance that they are safe. They may worry that they will die too or that their surviving loved ones will go away.

It may be easier to talk to children while doing other things eg – driving to and from school or sports/activities, giving young children a bath, reading them a story or when discussing a painting/story they have done recently.

Children need explanations that are simple, direct and truthful. Give the child as much information as they can understand and answer their questions honestly. Be open with your own feelings as letting them see your tears and sadness shows them it is ok to grieve openly.

Using stories to help explain death and dying can be useful, especially with young children who don't yet understand concepts. Suggested books available at Te Omanga Hospice: "Beginnings and Endings with Lifetimes in Between"; "When I'm Felling Sad"; "Old Hu-Hu"; "The Invisible String".

When you are talking to children about death, use direct words like cancer, died and death. Phrases like 'he's passed away', 'she's sleeping' or 'we lost him' can confuse children and lead to misunderstandings.

Explain the physical changes illness can cause so they know what is happening. It is ok for you to say "I don't know, but I will ask someone if they know." (Dr/nurse).

The following are some words you might find useful to talk to young children about death or this may give you some ideas for your own words.

“Sometimes people’s bodies are too old or too ill or too hurt to get better, even when the doctors and nurses try very hard to make them well again.”

“When people die they stop breathing and they stop thinking. Their heart stops beating and they do not feel anything. When people die, the special part we call ‘life’ leaves the body. Some people call this their ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’. This special part of people cannot come back to earth and we do not know what happens to it. It does not ever come back to the body. The body is quiet, and still and peaceful. Forever. “

“Sometimes children think it was their fault that the person died, or that they should have done something different to stop this from happening. This is not true and you don’t need to think this.”

“After a person has died, the body isn’t needed anymore. There is no pain and no feelings, so it is alright for the body to be peaceful and quiet like this. The person no longer ‘lives’ in the body after they have died.”

“A dead person cannot come back to life again. Death is not like sleep. And dying is not like sleeping. Sleeping is part of living and helps us to grow and feel stronger when we wake up in the morning each day.”

“After someone has died we can sometimes see the dead body so that we can say goodbye to it. If you would like to do that, there will be someone with you to help you. The body will be very still and will feel cold. Remember that the person who has died doesn’t need the body anymore and is not feeling anything or thinking anything.”



(This has been adapted from the book *Talking with Children and Young people About Death and Dying: a Workbook*. By Mary Turner; published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.)