

Talking to Children About Death

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.
Family Science Specialist
NDSU Extension

Precious Ngwayarudza, M.S.
Extension Associate
NDSU Extension

Death is a reality that each person, including children, will experience and can learn to understand and accept. For children, they often first encounter death through the loss of a pet or the passing of a family member. With conversation and care, children can understand death, explore their feelings about death, and learn to discuss and manage the loss experience that death brings. Parents and other adults can introduce understanding of death as part of life, talk about and share feelings or thoughts with children, and assist children in coping with loss or grief that they may experience when death occurs.

Stepping Stones to Understand Death

Children come to understand death more fully through experiences and conversations over time. Parents and caregivers can assist them in practical ways through the following steps.

- Even before the death of a close family member or friend, parents can introduce the idea of death as a part of everyday life. A story on the nightly news, a trip past the cemetery or a dead plant or bird may spark conversations about death.
- Begin conversations early in a child's life. Be honest about death and encourage children to ask questions or share their feelings or concerns about death.
- Understanding death is a gradual process. Be open to periodic conversations about death with kids. Children will take in information as they are ready and increase understanding over time.
- Allow children to feel and express their grief, which may appear in their emotions, through play, art or even acting out. Some children's programs that mention death as a theme may prompt questions or conversations with children.
- Read children's books together that share themes on death. Ask children about their understanding, how the story makes them feel or related questions on death. Listen and provide them with care, understanding and support.



Talking to Very Young Children (ages 0 to 4)

Infants (0 to 1 Year)

Infants at a very young age (ages 0 to 1) are at a stage where they are entirely dependent on their primary caregivers to provide a sense of security and of learning to trust them. An infant's understanding of death is limited; however, even the youngest child can sense when their family routine is disrupted or those around them experience emotional upset or strain. So, when a primary caregiver dies or the primary caregiver is in distress due to experiencing the loss of a loved one, infants can feel separation loss, a change in their routine and a tense environment.

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Potential Child Reactions

- Infants may start to fuss and cry a lot, have sleep problems or experience a change in eating patterns.

What to Say and Do

- To reduce their stress levels, an infant's routines and environment should be maintained and kept as familiar as possible to reinforce their sense of security.
- Provide consistent nurturing. If a parent is overly distressed or unavailable, seek to provide another adult caregiver to provide for needs such as feeding, diaper changes, bathing and comfort.

Young Children (Ages 1 to 4)

At this stage, young children begin to explore their environment independently and assert their own personality. Children as young as 3 years old are aware of death. However, typically children at this age will not understand death as something that is permanent. They may think of it as temporary or reversible. They may be concerned that the deceased are suffering in some way, such as being in pain, cold or hungry.

Potential Child Reactions

- The experience of death in a family at this stage can lead children to develop separation anxiety, lack of confidence, confusion and regression, such as bed-wetting and clinginess. Children may have frightening dreams or repeatedly ask questions about death or the deceased person. Children may refer to events surrounding the death in artwork or during play experiences.
- Children in this age period take words literally. Since they have limited experiences in the world, they connect events that don't relate. For example, if Aunt Sally died from a headache as part of an injury or illness, then if a mother or father refers to having a headache then the child may worry the parent will die too. Similarly, if a young child is told that someone died of "old age," then they may associate growing older with being near death and develop anxiety about older loved ones growing older, such as around a birthday.

What to Say and Do

- Listen to a child and pay attention to any signs of distress. When discussing death, give gentle reassurance through looks, soothing words or gentle touch.
- Shorten time spent away from the child. Be sure the child knows where you are and how to reach you. Check in regularly to see how they are feeling.
- Use simple language to explain to them what has happened. Tell them the truth, for example: "I am sad because Dad died; he is no longer breathing." Avoid confusing explanations such as the person is "just sleeping" or is "taking a long trip."
- Be physically and emotionally present to offer comfort when they need it. Reassure the child of their own safety and also of your continued presence.
- Repeat simple, honest explanations as often as the child asks. Explain that most people die when they are older.
- Allow expressions of feelings such as drawing pictures, reading and telling stories about death or the loved one, or acting out parts of the person's passing or interactions they had with the child.

Talking to School-Age Children (Ages 5 to 8)

During this stage, children start to set goals for themselves and imitate what they like. Magical thinking is still fairly common at this stage of development; children may think of death as something that is not final and can be reversed. They may sometimes think that death was a result of their thoughts or actions, such as wishing a person would disappear ("I wish Cousin Jimmy would just go away!") or not doing something ("I didn't help Grandma when she asked me, and now she died."). Children this age may believe that death can be avoided. Often, they are aware of death and begin to believe in personal mortality, as well as have fears related to death.

Potential Child Reactions

- Children of this age may have feelings of distress, confusion or sadness, or they may show limited reactions.
- Children might start having difficulty concentrating, experience tantrums or have eating and sleep problems.

- Having fears related to death or fear of abandonment by other family members is fairly common.
- A child's curiosity about death may increase, and they might start pretend playing about dying and being at a funeral or other memorial. They may be interested in the causes of death, as well as what happens physically after death occurs.
- Children of this age may display fears about death for themselves. For example, if a close family member or friend dies, the child may be curious about what their symptoms were and have worries about such symptoms for themselves or if they too could die at some point.

What to Say and Do

- Caregivers should allow children to ask all sorts of questions they may be curious about. Be a good listener. Correct any confusing ideas a child may have.
- Be ready to provide clear and honest responses that the children can understand. Simple language is encouraged, such as saying, "Your little sister's heart stopped working, and she died. We will not be able to see her with her body anymore."
- Reassure children that the death was not their fault. Caregivers need to be patient enough to repeat things until the children begin to understand.
- Caregivers should be physically and emotionally available for children.
- Children should be allowed to express their feelings through art and play. Provide supportive routines, materials needed or play opportunities. Some children prefer to express their thoughts about death by writing in a journal, drawing or doing other creative activities.
- Help children become comfortable sharing thoughts or feelings about death by being open and listening. Share stories or read children's books by reading stories related to death that offer hope, wisdom or perspective.

Talking to Adolescents (Ages 9 to 13)

Typically, children in this age category begin to understand that death is permanent, universal and inevitable. They also start to realize that they will die at some point in time and that all parts of the body will stop working when death occurs. They become curious about the cause of death and may have many questions, such as what happens after death. Some children may seem little affected by death, while others may worry about it or think of death as a punishment for bad deeds.

Potential Child Reactions

- At this stage of development, children may feel sad, lonely, afraid of losing more loved ones or of dying themselves.
- Children may become easily frustrated and angry, complain of headaches and stomach pains, or show signs of withdrawal. Help children express and process their feelings.
- Some children of this age may have feelings of anger directed at a variety of people — themselves, parents, others, the person who died, siblings. Feelings of guilt or grief may be linked with anger, as well as feelings of responsibility. Be patient with them and help them to process the anger through listening, companionship or shared activities.
- Academic performance or involvement with friends and activities may also be negatively affected. They may avoid, withdraw or feel overwhelmed. Extend consistent support and understanding.

What to Say and Do

- Caregivers should talk with children about how things will be different following a person's death and how they will be the same. Listen carefully and respond with honesty and facts.
- Reassure children of this age that feeling all sorts of emotions is normal. Let them know that you are always present for them whenever they need support, whether they want to talk or just share time together. Also, be respectful of boundaries if they want some time alone.
- Encourage young people to draw and journal their feelings, as well as read

age-appropriate books about death, loss and grief. Be available to discuss their thoughts in response to these ways of exploring their ideas and feelings.

- Be reassuring with children by talking positively about those who have died, explaining that they didn't die due to being "bad," or that the children did not somehow cause the death.
- If a child's grief response is overwhelming or extended, seek professional help if their feelings and actions are beyond your ability to understand or help. Contact a grief counselor and get help with available resources and supports.

Talking to Teens (Ages 14 to 18)

Teenagers often develop a more mature understanding of death but may have limited experience with the death of family members, friends or pets. When they first experience such a death, it can come as a shock and a significant turning point for them.

Teenagers can understand multiple concepts related to death. At this stage, they can understand that death cannot be reversed, comprehend the causes of death, realize that everyone dies, recognize that people's physical body parts stop functioning when they die, and understand that they will also die.

Potential Child Reactions

- Emotions tend to be strong during the teenage years, and this is quite common when a death occurs. Teens may feel confused, numb, responsible, helpless, angry, guilty, sad, lonely or afraid.
- Teens dealing with death may feel a need to carry more than they should, such as helping with adult concerns or managing family or financial well-being. Also, teens may assume some roles of the deceased person, deny their feelings or express anger that complicates the response.
- Some teens may struggle in response to a death, and show this by losing interest in activities or time with friends and family. They may withdraw and begin to struggle academically. They may become involved in risk-taking behaviors, such as substance misuse, to numb the pain or manage their difficult feelings.

What to Say and Do

- Make time to talk with teens about their feelings without criticizing or judging. Be willing to express your own feelings about a person's death or death in general. Be available to talk on the teen's time frame.
- Give teens opportunities to express their own emotions by engaging in activities such as listening to soul-soothing music, watching movies related to grief and loss, and writing in journals about their feelings.
- Caregivers can involve teens in the family's or community's mourning rituals if they want to participate. They may wish to share thoughts, attend a memorial, sing or perform an instrument, engage in spiritual activities, or otherwise remember a person who has died.
- Extend reassurance that support is always there for them if they need it. Grief can be an extended process for a young person, so patience is needed. Continue to support and listen to the teen's feelings over time.
- Allow teens time to be alone and independently process their thoughts and emotions on their own, as well as share conversation and support with them.
- Reassure teens that it is normal to sometimes feel sad, frustrated, angry, confused or numb in response to loss and grief. Encourage patience with themselves and their feelings.
- Seek professional help if signs of withdrawal, self-harm or anger seem to be beyond your ability to assist, or if a teen is overwhelmed or handling their response to a death in an unhealthy way.





- Encourage children to create a memory box where they can store keepsakes that remind them of the deceased person. Items can include pictures, jewelry, notes or other mementos related to the individual.
- For children who are able to express their feelings through drawing or writing, encourage them to put their emotions on paper through artwork and keep their creations in a safe place. Children may also express their feelings of loss through other forms of art expression.
- Work with children to create a timeline of the life of the deceased person. Include major and minor life events, important relationships or key transitions in the person's life. Combine it with pictures to have a visual depiction of the person's life.
- Participate in a "memory night" to celebrate the person who has passed away. Get together and watch the person's favorite movie, make and eat a meal or snack they most enjoyed, and share favorite stories from the person's life and personality.
- Plant a flower or tree in memory of the loved one who has died. Visit the location where it is planted on special occasions such as the person's birthday or other days.

Recommended Resources

Books Dealing with Death

Ages 0-4

- **Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death** by B. Zucker is a simple, thoughtful picture book to help young children understand death and related feelings. The book is developmentally appropriate, with detailed notes for parents with guidance on answering child questions about death. Magination Press – American Psychological Association; 2020.
- **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death** by L. Krasny Brown is a straightforward, comprehensive book to assist young children and families in understanding death. Little Brown Books for Young Readers; 1998.

Ages 5-8

- **A Sky of Diamonds** by C. Gibbs is a story from the perspective of a girl who has lost her mother. It covers different stages of grief and many practical strategies for coping with loss. Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2022.
- **The Invisible String** by P. Karst is a book about the unbreakable connections between loved ones that helps with coping with separation anxiety, loss and grief. The book is recommended by a wide variety of groups for grief support, with additional themed books in the series. Little Brown Books for Young Readers; 2018.
- **I Miss You: A First Look at Death** by P. Thomas is a gentle, age-appropriate resource for understanding death, grief and hope, including conversation prompts, child-friendly questions and practical advice. Sourcebooks Explore; 2001.

Ages 9-13

- **Cry, Heart, But Never Break** by G. Ringved is a story of four siblings who have a dying grandmother, and encounter Death, who explains gently and naturally about the importance of loss and being able to say goodbye. The book is poignant and thoughtful. Enchanted Lion Books; 2016.
- **Someone I Love Has Died: A Grief Activities Book for Children** by C. Stephenson is a resource book designed to help children navigate grief with gentle guidance and creative activities. Wooden House Books; 2024.

Ages 14-18

- **When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing** by M. Gootman is a sensitive book that explores questions teens often have during grief, complicated emotions and resources related to grief and loss. Free Spirit Publishing; 2019.
- **It Won't Ever Be the Same: A Teen's Guide to Grief and Grieving** by K. Leigh is a resource-rich book that speaks directly to teens experiencing grief, inviting teens to make sense of grief through words, artwork and creative activities to process their thoughts and feelings. Free Spirit Publishing; 2024.

For Adults

- **How Do We Tell the Children? A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children and Teens Cope When Someone Dies** by D. Schaefer & C. Lyons is a practical guide for adults responding to children's questions about loss, change, life and death, with a useful resource section. William Morrow Paperbacks; 2010.
- **When Someone a Child Loves Dies: A Booklist** is a detailed booklist created by a group of children's librarians identifying a collection of books for adults and the grieving children in their lives. Broken down by various types of loss, this is a useful resource for adults and youth to find books they can read together and process loss. Hosted by the Fred Rogers Institute at When Someone a Child Loves Dies: A Booklist. <https://www.fredrogersinstitute.org/resources/when-someone-a-child-loves-dies-a-booklist>

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