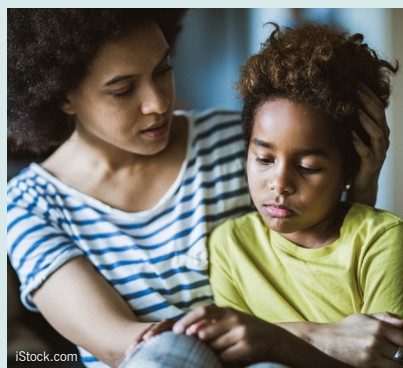


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Helping Children Understand Death

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D., Family Science Specialist, NDSU Extension
Precious Ngwayarudza, M.S., Extension Associate, NDSU Extension

Death is a common experience in life. Children who experience a loved one's passing often need help to learn about death, understand it and accept it. Parents and other caregivers can assist children to understand death as part of life, talk about and share feelings or thoughts with children, and assist children in coping with loss or grief associated with death.

Understanding the Reality of Death

Death is an inevitable reality. The day a loved one dies is often long remembered, especially by children. The loss of a loved one can bring profound hurt or confusion, even if a death is anticipated. No matter how many resources one may have to cushion the changes or challenges brought about by death, life will never be the same again.

When death occurs in a family, no one is ever truly prepared to share the heartbreaking news with close relatives and friends, or particularly with children. Even medical professionals, despite more extensive experience with death, still find it difficult to announce. As adults, we may become wrapped up in reflections on memories we shared with the deceased person, perhaps forgetting that children may be feeling the same pain of loss. Children often have many questions about death as they seek to understand and process it.

Although grief and loss can be overwhelming when death occurs, it is important to communicate with children,

answer their questions and help them integrate the loss into their lives. Rather than simply moving on, children need to understand that they are beginning a new chapter while also carrying the memories of their loved ones with them.

Though children are still developing emotionally and cognitively, research has shown that they are usually aware of the existence of death between ages 4 and 7. Children become aware of death through experiences such as an aging family member's passing, the death of a pet, or even the death of a flower or tree. Studies have also found that most children often appear to cope well in the immediate aftermath of a death in the family, with this period lasting up to a few months. However, some children may exhibit worse negative outcomes over time, such as withdrawal and anxiety. Children's understanding of death is believed to depend on their lived experiences. Therefore, caregivers carry a responsibility to help children understand and process loss, build emotional resilience and develop a healthy attitude toward life's natural events.

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Key Points About Death for Children to Learn

Death is a sensitive topic. It can be painful to experience a loved one's death, hard to understand and difficult to accept. Also, people have different beliefs and experiences related to death. Here are some key points for children to learn about death.

1. Death is Common

Death is a common experience, but people have different beliefs and perspectives on death based on their cultural, familial, spiritual or religious backgrounds.

- Help children understand that most people will have experiences with death, but may have different levels of comfort in sharing thoughts, beliefs or feelings about it. Be sensitive to their comfort level in asking questions.
- Assist children to accept that people have widely differing beliefs and perspectives on death and related matters (such as sharing death memories, handling bodies upon death, beliefs about a next life, etc.). Help children learn to be respectful of differing beliefs and views on aspects of death.
- Recognize that death may not affect children in the same way as adults with regard to feeling the loss of a loved one. A young person may not have as close a connection to someone deceased due to distance or lack of familiarity, and so they may not be feeling grief as strongly as a parent or other adults around them. Adults can grieve without expecting children to feel just the same, and children may grieve in small bursts while behaving normally the rest of the time.

2. Death is Permanent

Death results in the permanent end of a person's physical life.

- Children need to understand that death ends a person's physical life. The change that occurs is permanent. Children who are still developing might think that the person who has died will return or show up for a visit. Discuss the permanence of death and answer their questions. Help them understand physical death is permanent and real, which helps them to accept its reality and mourn.
- When a child witnesses the death of a person close to them or a pet, it often increases their understanding of the permanence of physical death. It helps them understand they cannot reverse it.

3. Death Ends Physical Functions

Death means that when a person or pet dies, the body's physical functions stop working. They can no longer use their senses of seeing, hearing, touching or tasting.

- Understanding that the body's functions have stopped working can reduce a child's anxiety or fear that the deceased person is still hurting or suffering physically.
- Without understanding that physical functions and sensations cease at death, children may be troubled by thoughts of their loved one feeling hungry, struggling under the weight of soil if the body is buried, in pain if cremated or being alone in a cemetery. Reassure them that such concerns do not exist for the deceased person.

4. Death Has Causes

Death comes about as the result of a specific cause that can usually be identified, such as accidents, illness, intentional violence or old age.

- While death can be hard to accept, a person's cause of death is usually not a mystery. It can be helpful to inform children about the cause of death, such as an accident, illness or old age, so they understand factors that can lead to death. Also, children may be curious about other possible causes of death. Open discussion about this topic can be helpful to a child and aid them in developing a rational understanding of the causes of death.
- Without understanding what causes death, children may have faulty ideas related to a person's death. For example, they may believe that perhaps their loved one died because they were mad at them or because the child did something wrong.
- Developing an understanding of causes of death can help children to avoid dangerous situations. For example, such knowledge can help children avoid or be cautious with risks such as playing on or next to the road, messing with electricity, handling toxic substances or other activities that can be harmful. This awareness can help children understand the necessity of taking precautions to safeguard their health and safety.

5. Death Affects Each Person and is Universal

Death occurs for all living things. It can occur for a human being, an animal or a plant. So, it will also occur for those around a child at some point.

- Children can develop self-awareness that death is inevitable for each living thing, which includes others they care about. Studies have shown that children who have encountered death and illness come to understand their own mortality.
- Children who are aware of death and its occurrence for each person may develop a greater awareness of their own vulnerability. If they are not aware of this concept, they might be more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior, thinking that they cannot really be harmed. It might also be harder for them to process the death of others.
- If a child doesn't recognize the universal occurrence of death, they may develop beliefs in selective mortality, thinking that they or their loved ones or a pet they cherish will not ever die.
- Children who understand the universal nature of death can then understand that if someone dies, they were not responsible for it. This awareness helps children not be overtaken by feelings of guilt, confusion or shame that their own thoughts or feelings may have influenced someone's death.

- Understanding the universal occurrence of death also helps children recognize that others will experience loss due to death and assists them in their ability to show empathy for those affected by death.

6. Death Doesn't Mean We Forget

Death ends a physical life, but we can still remember people or even pets we love through memories, stories, ceremonies or other means.

- Since death occurs for each person and living creature, that means each of us is mortal and will die at some point. Children should learn that loss is part of life with the support of caring adults. However, loss does not mean we must forget,

and we can preserve a tie to those who have died through memories, stories or meaningful ceremonies to remember a loved one.

- A person's physical body can be respectfully honored through burial, cremation or other appropriate means as a final farewell.
- While the physical body stops working at death, the memories a person shared with the deceased can be preserved and cherished. Possessions such as pictures or other items can be distributed among loved ones, and keepsakes that inspire memories can be kept and treasured as reminders of the one who died.

Myths Related to Death and Grief – What Kids Need to Know

Here are some myths related to death and grief that can complicate acceptance of death and the grieving process for children, along with some realities to share with children:

Myth: “You will easily get over it with time; time automatically heals everything.”

Truth: We will often live with the memories of a loved one's death for our entire lives. Death becomes a new normal that must be accepted, so we can continue with our lives and daily activities. There is no definitive timeline for grieving. Children should be allowed to grieve for as long as they need. Encourage them to express their feelings through writing, drawing or other creative activities. Listen to their thoughts and feelings to help them process grief and learn to accept death.

Myth: “Being sorrowful is a sign of weakness.”

Truth: Feeling pain and deep sorrow after losing a loved person or a pet is natural. People grieve in different ways. Children should be allowed to mourn their loss. Mourning is part of the process of accepting reality, dealing with a variety of emotions, coping with loss and healing over time. Provide additional resources for a child's grieving if necessary.

Myth: “Children should not attend funerals.”

Truth: Allowing children to attend funerals helps them understand the reality that death is permanent. It also gives them a chance to grieve in the presence of family. This helps them process their emotions and supports their emotional development. Witnessing the ceremony, participating in the rituals and feeling included typically helps children feel safe and secure and have a sense of belonging. If children do not want to attend the funeral, it is OK to respect their feelings. They should not be forced, but it may be helpful to understand why they do not feel like going. They may have a concern or fear that can be alleviated.

Myth: “Children are too young to understand death.”

Truth: No matter a child's age, they can feel the absence of a loved one. For young children, it is important to explain things to them in simple terms and respond to their questions thoughtfully. If they ask about the meaning of death, explain that it means the person can no longer eat, talk or open their eyes. Avoid using terms like “sleep” when referring to death because this can confuse and frighten the child, and it can lead them to think that if they go to sleep, they might never wake up.

Myth: “When parents are grieving, they should hide their emotions from children.”

Truth: Children learn through imitation, so if parents hide their emotions, it will be hard for their children to learn coping skills. It is okay to tell children about your feelings, such as, “I am upset because I am missing your brother, father or grandmother.” This helps model emotional expression and teaches children to express and process their own grief constructively. This gesture also fosters empathy in children.

Recommended Resources

Books Dealing with Death

Ages 0-4

- **Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death** by B. Zucker. This simple, thoughtful picture book can 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. This straightforward, comprehensive book can assist young children and their families understand death. Little Brown Books for Young Readers; 1998.

Ages 5-8

- **A Sky of Diamonds** by C. Gibbs. This story is from the perspective of a girl who has lost her mother, and it covers different stages of grief and many practical strategies for coping with loss. Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2022.
- **The Invisible String** by P. Karst. This book about the unbreakable connections between loved ones can help in coping with separation anxiety, loss and grief. Recommended by a wide variety of groups for grief support, with additional themed books in the series. Little Brown Books for Young Readers; 2018.

Ages 9-13

- **Cry, Heart, But Never Break** by G. Ringtved. This 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. Poignant and thoughtful. Enchanted Lion Books; 2016.
- **Someone I Love Has Died: A Grief Activities Book for Children** by C. Stephenson. This resource book was 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. This sensitive book 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. The resource-rich book 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 and C. Lyons. This is a practical guide for adults in 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.** This detailed booklist was 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, 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](#).

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