



Patient & Family Guide  
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# Talking to Children About Death and Grief

## Information for Parents and Caregivers

Aussi disponible en français :  
*Parler de la mort et du deuil aux enfants:  
Information pour les parents et les personnes  
qui s'occupent des enfants (FF85-2146)*



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# Talking to Children About Death and Grief

Caring for an upset or grieving child is not as hard as you might think. You may sometimes feel like you don't know what to do to help them, and may find their sadness very painful to watch, but you can help. If you can understand other parts of your child's life, then you can help them through grief and loss.

Children grieve in different ways, depending on:

- › their stage of emotional development
- › any past experiences with loss
- › the level of support they get from family and caregivers

A child's grief is natural and normal, and most of the time they can handle it. It helps when there is lots of support and encouragement from family and friends. Make time to take care of your own grief needs too. This will help you support your child.

## **How you can help**

Children learn how to grieve by watching adults grieve. Children are flexible and open to new experiences. They will take cues from you. If you keep them away from death or choose not to include them in grief, they may come to think that death and grief are not important.

Talking with children about death and grief will help to address their fears and answer their many questions. Let them know that their questions are normal and, as much as possible, answer them truthfully.

It is common for adults to want to protect children from grief and strong emotions. This is not always helpful. For example, you may need to tell your child that their mom is going to die, but are afraid you might start crying or get overwhelmed. Children are not hurt by seeing strong emotions. **You can tell them that you are sad and that it's OK to be sad.** They will learn from this and may have their own strong emotions to share.

## **Children Coping with Disease and Dying**

### **When someone is very ill**

Children are curious and full of questions about illness and disease. It is a good idea to keep them updated on the basic details of a loved one's illness.

Children are often very aware that their parents and caregivers are distressed. They notice how their parents act, their body language, and their tone of voice. Children often pick up on tiny traces of adult worry and concern.

Tell your child about health changes in the person who is ill, and that they are caused by the disease and its treatments. Use clear, simple words to explain each new change. **Giving very young children clear and honest information regularly can help them understand what they are seeing and hearing.**

Talk about the things that your child might notice. They might see weight loss, changes in skin colour, or hair loss. They might hear coughing, confusion, or people awake at night. They may wonder whether the person will get well or not. You will need to go over this information again as things change. Be honest with your child about what the changes mean.

### **Family visits at the hospital or hospice**

Sometimes, the excitement and energy of a young child can be tiring or overwhelming. Plan for your child to have something to do during the visit. Quiet toys, drawing paper, and other simple activities can be shared with the person that you're visiting. Sharing your child's favourite take-out lunch or dinner is a comfortable way to spend time together. Be ready to leave when your child shows you, through their mood or behaviour, that they are ready to go.

## Make time to talk

When someone you love is seriously ill, it can be hard to find time to talk about it with your child. Children do not always have the words they need to tell adults about their feelings and questions. Make time for these conversations with your child. For example, you might find that snuggling at bedtime is a good time to check on how your child is doing. Mealtimes or car rides may also be good times for these talks.

When parents are distracted with caring for others or grieving, a child's basic needs for nurturing and encouragement may be overlooked. This can leave the child feeling lonely. During these times, **keeping up your child's usual routines** and arranging for your child to spend time with other caring adults may be helpful. **Since many children will avoid asking questions because they are scared of upsetting others or making the situation worse, it is important that you start and continue these discussions throughout the illness.**

# Children Coping with the Death of a Loved One

## Should children be present at death?

Parents choose the level of involvement that children have in the dying process. They also give permission for their children to openly show their feelings during grief.

As a parent, it is important to remember that you learned to grieve from your parents. What were the grief rules when you were young?

- Were you allowed to show emotion or encouraged to keep a 'stiff upper lip'?
- Did you see the body?
- Were you involved in the funeral or kept at home?
- How long were you allowed to grieve before you had to stop and 'get on with life'?

These unspoken rules often guide much of what we say to our children about grief. You may wish to think about whether these rules will help your child feel comfortable with death and grief.

It is usually OK for children to be present for dying and death. It can be painful, sad, and scary, but most children and teens are curious, and quickly adjust to knowing that their loved one is dying. Many children are comfortable climbing right onto the bed and cuddling up with their dying family member. It is OK for children to be present for the last breath. It can teach them important lessons about what it means to be human. If your child was not present at the time of death, tell them what has happened soon after the death.

Some children may be worried about being around a dying loved one. They may have a strong wish to not be present. It is good to talk openly with your child about their feelings and ideas so that they feel understood. Children often have mistaken ideas about death or are afraid of what they don't know. By talking about the dying process, death, and what happens to bodies after a person dies, you may find that your child is more open and curious about death.

**Being around dying and death helps children to feel better about grief and loss later in life.**

# Children and Grief

## Telling a child that someone has died

Use plain, simple language when telling a child that someone has died.

- Say things like, ‘Their heart doesn’t beat, their ears don’t hear, and their body doesn’t move anymore.’
- Tell them that the person cannot feel anything anymore.
- Explain that the person who died will not be coming back to life.
- There is nothing wrong with phrases like ‘gone to heaven’ or ‘with the angels’ as long as you also help the child understand that the person’s body has died. Children need concrete facts about the living body and what happens to it when we die.
- Avoid comparing death to sleep.
- Answer any questions they have, such as “Were they in pain?”

It may be helpful to talk about a past loss that the child remembers, such as the death of a pet or another person, to show that dead people don’t come back. It can be very helpful for children to see the person after death. It helps them understand in a very concrete way that when someone dies, their body stops working

completely. **Seeing their dead loved one also helps children to be less afraid of death later in life.** It teaches them that death is a natural and normal part of the human experience.

### **Getting ready for rituals and funerals**

Some parents choose not to include their children in funerals and celebrations, while others feel good about including them. They can be included in choosing a casket, clothing, or flowers, and in the service itself. Some children may want to speak or write, make a piece of art, sing a song, or be included in the service in some other way.

Before attending the visitation, funeral, memorial service, or wake, explain to your child what will happen, who will be there, and how people may act (for example, tears, sobbing, sadness). Explain what role, if any, your child will have. It is good to include children in rituals if possible. You know your child best and can decide how involved they will be.

If there will be an open casket at the service, you can explain that the loved one's body will be there so that people can say goodbye to them, and that the casket will be used to bury the body in the ground. If the person was cremated, you can talk about that process and what will happen to the person's ashes.

## **Children need to talk about grief**

Children will need to talk about their feelings and thoughts long after the death. If you don't talk about your loss, your child probably won't either. **If you continue to talk about the person who died and how you are both feeling, it will help your child to understand and accept their loss.**

For example, if you both talk openly about the person who died, sharing memories and feelings, the child will know they are not responsible for the sadness that you both feel.

Ask your child where they feel their sadness in their body. Help them locate the physical pain and sensation. You may invite them to draw a picture of their body and the pain feelings inside it.

## **Keep reminders of your loved one**

Keep objects or pictures of the person who died available to your child. These are often a source of comfort and pleasure. For example, if your son's grandpa died, he may want to keep a special picture of him in his room and wear his slippers. It might also be especially important on birthdays or special holidays to find a way to remember grandpa. Find out what helps your child feel connected to the person he grieves for.

## **A child's grief is different from an adult's**

Remember that your child's grieving process will be very different from your own. Children live in the moment. Some children will want to talk about the death, while others will want to be left alone. Some may stay busy and others may withdraw from all activities. Children often won't immediately realize the full extent of the loss.

It is normal for your child to show grief in short bursts quickly followed by happier activities. There may also be sudden outbursts of anger, guilt, or fear. When this happens, let your child feel their feelings and help them find safe ways to express them.

A grieving child may become unmanageable and demanding. For example, this can show up as frequent sulking, clinging, or misbehaviour. This is normal. Reassure, nurture, and encourage your child. Be aware that these behaviours tend to be most extreme at home and directed at you if you are the remaining parent or caregiver. If a parent who died was the main disciplinarian, it is important that you quickly find your own way of keeping order and respect in the family. If you need help, ask other parents that you respect, or teachers, coaches, or school counsellors for help. There are also agencies that offer parenting support and information classes.

## **Children get anxious about illness and death**

After a death in the family, children often become quite curious and concerned about death. Your child may ask often about whether or when other people in their life will die. They will likely be concerned about their own death or yours. This kind of fear often shows up in your child's body. For example, they may complain of symptoms similar to the person who died, such as headaches or stomachaches.

If your child complains in this way, they need your loving attention, patience, and understanding. Reassure them that you are both healthy and that you do not have what the person who died had. If your child is showing a lot of anger, you may want to do something active like play soccer or tag together. If they are sad, you might talk about the person who died or look at pictures together. If their anxiety does not seem to lessen with time and attention, you may want to bring them for a visit to your family doctor.

These moments may be especially hard for you because of your own grief. Be sure that you give yourself the time and space to grieve so that you are able to support your child as they grieve. You will also need to express and share your emotions and questions with other adults.

**Ask for the support of key adults in the child's life, such as a teacher, principal, coach, or group leader.**

As children mature, they begin to look to other adults, as well as their parents, to give them a sense of well-being, self-esteem, and security. Let the key people in your child's life know about the death, so that they can help your child deal with the awkwardness and curiosity of other children and adults.

## **Tips for developmental stages**

### **Children aged 3 to 5**

At this age, children see themselves as the centre of most things they experience. They believe that their thoughts and behaviours are the cause of events. If your child sees that you are very upset, they may think that they are the cause of your grief. Careful, frequent explanations will help your child feel less anxious.

Children at this age are anxious when separated from parents or primary caregivers. They may be distressed by expressions of powerful emotions by adults. At this age, children may feel scared and responsible when they see a parent or other adult in distress. They need reassurance. Carefully and calmly explain what you are feeling and why.

Very young children tend to have little contact with people and groups outside the family. When someone in the family is ill, this often means that your child will visit a number of new places (such as hospitals) and meet new people (such as doctors and nurses). There are books and toys that you can use to help your child become familiar with these new situations. Always ask them if they have questions.

### **Children aged 6 to 8**

Some children in this age group will be able to understand cause and effect, but most will still think in the self-concerned ways of younger children. Children of this age usually feel free to express their emotions. Drawings, short stories, and playing are ways to help your child understand more about the illness or death and how they feel about it. Avoid using words that the child may not understand, such as 'terminally ill' or 'passed on'.

Unlike younger children, 6 to 8-year olds may stay focused on the illness or death of a family member, and can easily be overwhelmed by their emotions. The sadness, anger, anxiety, or guilt that they may feel about a loved one's illness usually shows up as a change in behaviour. For example, you may notice that a confident child is now anxious and resistant, and cries and has stomachaches when you take them to school each day. Talk to the child's teacher about helping them express their feelings and making sure they feel safe when you are not with them.

It is common for children of this age to feel rejected and unloved if you take time and energy away from them to care for a loved one. Since you may not be able to help this, it is important that you spend special time alone with your child each day and regularly explain why you are leaving them.

Include your child in your grief process. Show and tell them how you are feeling and what you do with your grief. This will help them to understand their own feelings and how to express them.

## **Children aged 9 to 12**

By this age children understand that death is final and that every person eventually dies.

There may still be some denial at times, but this is a normal part of adult grief too.

It may help to be more clear about the details of dying. Children of this age are curious and will appreciate straightforward facts: what happens to the person's body in death, was the person in pain, what does the body look like and feel like, and what will happen to the body at the funeral home or through cremation or burial. Children can be given tasks to help with funeral or celebration of life gatherings. Talking about the death and involving them can help them better adjust and understand this new experience.

Children of this age are still developing emotional awareness. They have more organized feelings, but they may not always trust them or want to share them. They will watch others closely for cues on what to feel and how to grieve. Gently encouraging them to talk and share can really help them express their feelings.

## Online Resources

- › <https://kidsgrief.ca>
- › [www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com](http://www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com)
- › [www.dougy.org/grief-resources/help-for-kids](http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/help-for-kids)

This pamphlet is just a guide. If you have questions, please talk to your health care provider. We are here to help you.





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For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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*Designed by: NSHA Library Services*

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.