



HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

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<https://www.migrantclinician.org/witness-to-witness>

Many people are uncertain about how to talk to children about the death of a loved one. Different cultures have different preferences. It is always difficult for an adult to tell a child that a loved one has died. Even when the person who died is very old and the death was expected for a very long time, it is hard to tell a child. When a healthy person dies after a brief illness, it is exceptionally difficult to tell a child that the death has happened.

Many adults think they can't tell the child until they won't cry or show strong emotion. That is not true. It may be true that being distraught and hysterical will be hard for a child to see. But crying or sadness is not usually a problem for a child.

It's best to start by only telling the child or even a teenager a short version of what happened. You can tell the child you will answer any questions they have and then wait. Some children will have questions right away. Some children will have none ever. Some will have questions later. Some children will want to withdraw and not talk about the death for a while. Some children will approach you for comfort. There is no right or wrong way for a child to respond.

Children need to know that they are loved and that they are safe. They need to know who will take care of them and who will support them. You may not know the answers to these questions. You can tell a child that you will figure all of this out; that the child will not be alone.

The process of living with death for a child is just that: a process. Children need ways to stay connected to the person who died, just like adults do. Sometimes a piece of clothing helps. Sometimes a photo. If there is a recording of the person's voice, this can be comforting. Children need ways of mourning that make sense to them. Some children like to light a candle at dinner. Some children name a stuffy after the loved one and curl up with it. A young child might even name a blanket for the loved one. You can help a child figure out what they want to do to feel connected to the person who has died.

Generally decisions about wakes, funerals or mourning services or going to the cemetery or grave will be in accordance with cultural and family traditions. Again, there is no right or wrong way. In these moments of separation and isolation, perhaps none of these family and social group customs are possible, but children can chat and see people on WhatsApp, Facetime or

phone, or even participate in long-distance rituals, with other family members who know them well and who can provide security and comfort.

It's important to remember that even the most heartbroken child can grow up to live a good life, full of love and meaningful connections.