

KinderMourn

Talking with Young Children about Death

- It is valuable to speak of death using real words rather than euphemisms. **Use statements such as “His body stopped working and he died;” “She is dead. She is not alive anymore,”** rather than well meaning—but often confusing statements—such as “We lost him;” “She has gone to sleep;” “He passed;” “She went to heaven,” etc. This is especially critical with concrete-thinking young children who take statements **very literally**.
- The way we discuss death with young children needs to be different than how we discuss it with adults. Young children are **not** just tiny adults: while adults already have an existing schema for what “death” is, young children do not. As concrete thinkers, young children require concrete explanations of death.

See below for what young children often hear/think when presented with common euphemisms about death:

When adults say...	Young children think...
“We lost him.”	“Where did he go?” “When will he be back?” “How can we find him?” <i>Children may worry that others will “get lost” too and become increasingly clingy towards caregivers.</i>
“She’s sleeping.”	“When will she wake up?” “I’m afraid to go to sleep now too, because the same thing that happened to her could happen to me.” <i>It is important differentiate between death and sleep. Although a deceased person may look like they are sleeping, make sure that young children understand that sleeping people wake up, but people who have died do not wake up.</i>
“He passed away.”	“Where did he go? Where is ‘away?’” “When will he come back?” <i>The phrase “passed away” is incredibly confusing for young children.</i>
“She’s in your heart.”	“How did someone so big get small enough to fit into my heart?” <i>Remember, concrete thinking children take things incredibly literally. They interpret this statement as the deceased actually (physically) existing in their own heart. This can exacerbate their confusion around death. Instead, you can say something along the lines of “Even though she died and she is not alive anymore, we can always feel connected to her in our hearts.” The children’s book <u>The Invisible String</u> is a fantastic way to incorporate this message.</i>
“She went to Heaven”*; “She’s an angel now.”*	“Why would she choose to leave me?” “When will she be back?” Note: <i>It’s OK to share your religious beliefs, see below for further guidance on incorporating spiritual beliefs with young children.</i>
“God/Jesus ‘took’ him.”*	“Why would God take away my loved one?” “God/Jesus is mean.” “I’m afraid God will start taking away more people that I love.” Note: <i>Avoid saying things like “this is God’s will” or “God took him to heaven” as this may cause children to resent God or to fear that God may take other loved ones as well.</i>

***See further below for more guidance on incorporating your family’s spiritual beliefs with young children.**

- It is helpful to explain death as one's body having been affected (by an illness, injury, etc.) in such a way that their body no longer works like it needed to in order to stay alive. Explain how to be alive: one's heart needs to beat, one needs to be able to breathe, etc., and that death means that the deceased's body cannot do those things anymore. **Example: "When someone dies, their heart stops beating and their lungs stop breathing. They no longer eat, drink, move, talk, feel, or sleep."**
- Children's fears and fantasies are often far worse when they are not told what is happening or are given misleading information. Knowing—and naming—the correct diagnosis (such as cancer, heart disease, addiction, brain injury, etc.) helps your child understand the difference between the illnesses that we all get and the types of diseases that can cause death. This may help to reassure your child that you, your child, and other loved ones are healthy and will go on together.

Some examples* are:

- **Example for death by injury:** "We all get hurt, but that does not mean that we will die every time we get hurt. Remember when you fell and scraped your knee? We put a bandage on it and your body healed. Most of the time, when someone gets hurt, they get better! But, ___'s body got so badly hurt by (name the cause of injury), that it caused their heart to stop beating. Once their heart stopped beating and their body stopped working, they died."
- **Example for death by illness:** "We all get sick, but that does not mean that we will die every time we get sick. Most of the time, when someone gets sick, they get better! But, ___ had a sickness called (name the sickness). This was a different kind of sickness and ___ did not get better. The (name the sickness) made their body stop working (e.g., heart stop beating, lungs stop breathing, etc.), and they died."

***Note:** These are extremely broad/vague examples. It can be helpful to reach out to a Certified Child Life Specialist if you are seeking specific guidance in how to explain certain diseases or injuries to children in developmentally appropriate language. Please let us know if you need help and we can connect you with local Certified Child Life Specialists.

- Incorporate your family's spiritual beliefs as you see fit, but avoid making things more confusing for children. **It is important for young children to understand that a loved one has died (and to understand what death is) before incorporating spiritual beliefs.**
 - You might say something like "When someone's body stops working and they die, their body stays here (*You can include information about how we "take care of their body" here, like "turning it into ashes," or "burying their body in the ground at a cemetery"*), but in our family we believe that all of the wonderful and special parts of them that we love are safe with God in heaven."
 - Avoid language that indicates that God/your higher power "took" the deceased away, as this can cause children to resent God and fear that God may "take" other loved ones as well.
 - Keep in mind that for young children, the abstract concepts of heaven and afterlife will be **incredibly difficult** to grasp. For a young child, heaven is a physical place just like any other. When heaven is introduced to young children, it is not uncommon for them to want to "go to heaven too" (just like you would want to go visit a loved one who has moved far away). Young children can feel confused or upset once they learn they cannot go visit the deceased in heaven, and that the deceased will not be coming back to visit. One way to help them through this is to explain that heaven is only for those who do not have bodies that are alive anymore.

- It can be helpful to explain death using references that young children can grasp. Explain death's place in nature. Deaths of plants, insects, animals, etc. can be opportunities to educate children about the cycle of life. **This way of learning can help children grasp that every living thing has a lifetime which ends in death and that every living thing will eventually die.**
- Try to avoid generalizations relating death to old age (e.g., "Nana died because she was old"). This can lead to confusion or even mistrust when children realize that young people can die too. It would be preferable to say something like, "Nana lived a long time before she died. Most people live a long time, but some don't."
- There is great value in normalizing for a young child the variety of feelings which the death may provoke such as sadness, confusion, anger, etc., while also giving them the "permission" to still enjoy life. It is valuable to say things like, **"We will cry and we will feel sad about this death and that is okay. We will also still get to feel happy and still be able to have fun. That is okay too."** **Children need to know that they are still allowed to be a child amidst the intensity of grief.**
- **Answer questions as openly and honestly as possible.** Children will come up with their own answers that may be scarier than the truth when their questions are not answered. Children may ask the same questions again and again. Be consistent and honest so your child learns that the answer will not change and that you can be trusted to tell the truth.
- Young children are prone to **magical thinking** and fantasies leading to feelings of guilt are common. Almost all children—at some point—may have felt anger towards their loved one. In the magical world of a child, wishes and desires are believed to cause things to happen. When the death of that loved one occurs, children may think that their thoughts had something to do with it. Children may need to be reminded that their thoughts, feelings, desires, or actions did **not** cause the death, nor can they make a sick person healthy or bring the deceased back to life.