



Talking about dying with children

Why children need to talk about dying

We can't protect children from death. They encounter it all the time – whether it's a mouse brought in by the cat or a grandparent dying. At an early age, they can form their own beliefs around it.

If we leave children alone with fears and misunderstandings regarding death, they can grow and grow. Children are more open to conversations about death than adults often realise. We need to talk to children about dying so that the myths don't take over, and so that they don't feel isolated or guilty about what they think. It's much better to have helped children have an understanding of death, funerals, burial and cremation before being confronted with these things when someone close to them dies.



How to get started

Try to make sure they feel comfortable asking questions or expressing their opinions on death, and try to let them lead the conversation. Talk about death as a part of life and how life and death go together. Use the natural world to demonstrate the way in which all things die – flowers withering, leaves falling.

You can use these opportunities:

- Books about dying tailored for children (you can find a list on the Dying Matters website).
- Finding a dead animal or the death of a pet can be an opportunity to start a conversation about dying. Let the child be there when it is buried, and carry out rituals like planting flowers.
- Involve children in family activities including attending funerals if they want to. It's an opportunity for them to say goodbye. Tell them what to expect.
- Memory boxes can be a good way of helping children remember loved ones who have died.

Having a conversation about death with children

Children may ask practical questions instead of talking about their feelings. Sometimes these might sound strange. What's it like inside a coffin? What does a dead body really look like? Will I be a ghost when I die? These are entirely sensible things to wonder – and it can be reassuring to a child if you discuss them, rather than dismissing them as silly.

A few tips:

- Listen carefully so you know exactly what they mean. If you don't know the answer, say so.
- Don't worry if you think you've answered the question badly – it's more important to the child that you've paid attention.

- Try not to look uncomfortable answering their questions – it may create the impression that talking about these things is not allowed.
- Try and answer their question as soon as they've asked it – children's attention span is limited. A series of short conversations is often easier than long sessions.
- Be clear and direct in your language – using phrases such as 'passed away' rather than 'died' can leave them confused.
- Children understand words very literally, and you may need check they haven't misunderstood.
- There's no harm in a child seeing that you are sad or crying if someone has died. It may help them know their own grief is acceptable.





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The Dying Matters coalition is led by Hospice UK, the national charity for hospice and palliative care. We support over 200 hospices throughout the UK that care for over 200,000 patients and their families a year.

A gift to Hospice UK is a special way to honour the life of your loved one. By doing so, you are remembering them through helping others to receive the very best care at the end of their life.

You can create a lasting memory of someone special by:

- giving a donation to celebrate their life
- dedicating a leaf on the beautiful Hospice UK Tree of Life in their name
- undertaking a challenge or hosting an event to honour their memory
- leaving a gift in your Will to support the sustainability of our work as a lasting legacy of your loved one.

We are here to help

However you choose to remember someone, we are here to help.

To create your memory, please see our website:

www.hospiceuk.org/support-us or call 020 7520 8266.



Hospice UK leads the Dying Matters Coalition. Charity registered in England and Wales No. 1014851 and in Scotland No. SC041112.



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*'Let's talk
about it*

For more information visit:
www.dyingmatters.org