



Center for Early Education and Development

# Questions About Kids

## How Can I Help My Child Understand Death?

Caring parents try to protect their children from difficult situations. But they should not ignore a child's inevitable curiosity about death. Because death is a difficult concept for a young child to understand and usually an emotional issue for adults, it is best to gradually introduce children to the idea that death is a normal part of the life cycle.

### What Do Children Think About Death?

Children's concepts of death change as they mature. It's difficult for a three- to five-year-old to comprehend the finality of death. He sees death as a temporary separation—"Why can't Grandpa come to dinner tonight?" Children this age can't conceive of the distant future or of the absence of life. They may also believe death to be reversible; if they hear that death is the end of one life and the beginning of another, they may ask questions like "Will Grandpa turn into a baby now?" Young children believe that death is accidental, but not inescapable, that a person dies if she is very sick or very old, or gets run over by a car or killed by a robber.

Six, seven, and eight-year-olds believe death is caused by something outside of the self—the "boogie man" concept—and try to figure out what causes death. A child of nine or ten understands that everyone, including her, will die eventually. By the time a child reaches eleven, he begins to define life and death in biological and medical terms and views death as the cessation of all bodily functions.

### How Can I Introduce the Concept of Death to My Child?

If possible, it's best to introduce the concept of death in a matter of fact way in the context of everyday life. When a household plant dies or you see a dead bird, explain to your child what has happened. Mention the death of a famous person or distant relative to your child. These situations allow your child to become accustomed to the subject and set the stage for coping with the death of a loved one.

### How Can I Best Help My Child Cope With the Experience of Death?

- If a family member or friend is seriously ill, explain the situation to the child. Do not hide the facts. Children are unusually perceptive and sense that something is wrong when they overhear hushed whispers. Do not treat the situation as a secret that is too dangerous for the child to know about.
- Show interest in your child's questions and encourage her to talk over her feelings. Young children are inquisitive and not easily satisfied by vague answers. If a child doesn't get answers to his questions, he may make up his own, which may often be more frightening than the truth. It is the job of parents to explain reality, even if it is painful.

Listen carefully to what your child asks. A young child who asks "Are you going to die, Mommy?" may really be asking "Who will take care of me? Will I be left all alone?" Tell your child that you take good care of yourself and plan to live a long, long time.



Reassurance and comfort given by a caring parent can help ease fears of abandonment.

**Never tell a child what he will need to unlearn later.**

**Avoid references to “sleep, slumber, or resting.”**

Try to make certain that the information you give is appropriate for your child’s stage of development, and don’t offer more information than your child is really seeking. If you have introduced your child to the concept of religion, you may want to include those beliefs in your discussion about death. A child who is not familiar with such ideas, however, will not be consoled by religious explanations which are mentioned for the first time.

- Never tell a child what he will need to unlearn later. Avoid figurative language, such as references to “sleep, slumber, resting,” etc., when explaining death to a child. Young children do not understand figurative language and often take it quite literally. What is meant to provide emotional reassurance may have the opposite effect and instead cause additional fear and anxiety. Studies have shown that sleep disturbances occur among children who have been offered this type of explanation. Some children may fight going to sleep for fear they will never wake up, or a child who is told “God took Grandma because she was so good” may decide not to be good for fear of being taken by God.

**Encourage him to express feelings... Let him see you cry, and tell him it is OK to feel sad.**

- Let your child participate in significant events following the death of a loved one. Rituals are important to the grieving process. If it is a family custom to attend funerals, young children (age four and up) should be allowed to attend, even if only for a few minutes. Funerals help children (and adults) acknowledge the finality of death and provide a time to say goodbye. A parent’s own feelings must determine whether a child should view the body of the dead person. For some children, it is easier to say goodbye to a body rather than a coffin; for some, this may be traumatic.
- Help teach your child the meaning of mourning. Encourage him to express feelings of sadness.

Let him see you cry, and assure him that it is acceptable to feel sad. Tell your child that although Grandma won’t be coming back, there are many happy memories to talk and think about. Giving the child a special memento of the dead person (a piece of jewelry, a favorite handkerchief) may help ease the sadness. Help your child to understand that feelings of denial, guilt, and anger are also natural reactions. Expressing and sharing the deeply felt emotions surrounding a death can help children deal with their grief and fears and strengthen the bonds between parents and children.

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**Questions About Kids is on the Web at:**

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