

Conversations with Kids about Death and Grief

As with any challenging conversation, talking about death, loss, and grief provides opportunities for a discussion that strengthens our connection with the child and supports feelings of safety, security, and trust.

- **Talk factually.** Include the words “died” or “dead”. Children may be confused by the words “passed away”, “lost”, “went to sleep”, etc., and research shows that using realistic words helps the grieving process. Even a young child may understand, “When someone dies, their body stops working”.
- **Children may ask the same questions repeatedly.** This is a typical part of their process of learning about death and how it is permanent. Answer honestly and consistently. They are trying to better understand or needing an adult’s reassurance, and each time you answer, the child will gain more insight. As their understanding of death grows, so do their questions.
- **It is okay to answer with “I don’t know”.** You can answer with, “That is a great question. I don’t know the answer but tell me more about what you are thinking about with that.” In doing so, you are validating their questions and feelings and allowing for exploration.
- **Children often cope through play.** Children may use play in order to cope with their grief and to even take a break from the grief. Death may even be incorporated into their play which is normal processing and learning.
- **Be prepared and accept a variety of emotional responses.** Every child reacts differently. Some kids cry, some ask questions, and others seem not to react at all. That’s okay.
- **Normalize a child’s feelings no matter what they are.** Explain that it’s okay to feel sad, scared, confused, etc. You can offer support by sharing how you are feeling. Share your sadness with the child as a way of coping, as it gives a child permission to express their own feelings. Some children may feel shock, fear, anger, or guilt. There is no one way to grieve, and it is important to honor each child’s experience.
- **Crying is healthy and healing, and it helps normalize grief.** It also demonstrates the love and connection to the person who died. Acknowledge that grief can be felt in our heart and body.
- **This is not a one-time conversation.** Children continue to process death as they develop. As children grow and change, their concept and understanding of death also grows and changes.
- **Incorporate your family’s faith and beliefs in your conversations.**