

WHEN SOMEONE YOUR CHILD LOVES DIES

A guide from the Fred Rogers Institute

Talking with Your Child When a Loved One Dies

Whether this death was expected or sudden, it can feel overwhelming to tell your child. Remember that your love and presence is the best thing to help them through this time.

Tips for talking to your child...

- Be open to any questions your child may have, and try to answer your child's question as directly as you can. Know that your child may ask the same question over and over as they try to process and understand what is happening. If you are unsure of the answer or unsure of what to say, it is okay to say "I wonder about that, too."
- Use concrete words when you talk to your children. Use the word "died," rather than "passed away" or "went to sleep" to avoid confusion. Children of all ages may make up reasons for things they don't fully understand, and these reasons can be more upsetting than the truth.
- You can talk to your child about what happens to a person's body when they die if they need help understanding. For example, you can let them know that when people die, they don't need to breathe anymore. Using the word "don't," rather than "can't," helps your child to understand that the person does not need help and is not in pain or discomfort.

"There is one thought that I feel can be helpful to grown-ups and children alike: Sadness isn't forever. I'm not suggesting that we remind ourselves of this in order to lessen our grief. On the contrary. The knowledge that time does bring relief from sadness and that sooner or later there will be days when we are happy again may allow us to grieve more fully and deeply when we need to." - Mister Rogers Talks with Parents

What Your Child May Feel

After learning of their loss, your child may have all sorts of feelings and thoughts. Here are some reactions you may see in your child while they grieve:

- **Guilt:** Sometimes, children may feel that the death is their fault. Children may feel that any past mad thoughts or actions towards the deceased have somehow caused the death. You can help redirect this emotion by assuring your child that death is a natural part of human life and it was in no way their fault.
- **Anger:** Expressing anger or confusion is a natural reaction to losing someone. Children may feel anger toward family members and, in some cases, may feel anger toward the person who died. If your child is feeling angry, you can give them ideas of how to express their anger in a way that does not hurt themselves or others. Show them they can yell or punch into a pillow, or talk to them about other ways you handle your own feelings.
- **No Reaction:** Some children show little or no strong emotional reactions to a death. This could be because they do not fully understand the finality of death. It may also be that doing normal activities, such as spending time with friends or playing, is the way they are processing the death. Some children react, at first, by denying the person has actually died. It may help to let them know that if the hard feelings do come, you will be there for them.



“What do you do with the sad that you feel?”

The best thing we can do for our children during hard times is to be there for them. Let children know that it is okay to embrace and express their feelings, that they can come to you whenever they want to talk, and that you will be there to care for them. Here are some ways you can help your child:

- Keeping the routines and expectations in your child’s life consistent can help them feel safe and secure in the face of the changes that can come with a death.
- Sharing memories and stories with your child about the person who has died may help them work through their grief. Art projects are one way you can connect over your memories of your loved one.
- Children may engage in different forms of play after a difficult event like death. Young children may use imaginative play about death to process what is happening. This can be a normal coping mechanism and a way to communicate non-verbally. By watching your child play, you might see them act out any misunderstandings or confusion that they don’t know how to talk about.
- It may help to give children the opportunity to participate in the traditional events of a funeral or memorial service. This gives children time to work through the process of healing alongside family, friends, and community. Some ways children can participate in the funeral are by passing out programs, greeting people, lighting candles, or singing/playing music.

“When the gusty winds blow and shake our lives, if we know that people care about us, we may bend with the wind...but we won’t break.” - Fred Rogers

What comes next?

- Remember that there is no timeline for grief. You and your child can both go through ups and downs as you grieve the loss of your loved one and begin to adjust to a new normal. The important thing is that you are going through this together.
- Let your child’s school know about the death. Other adults in your child’s life can be an important part of their support system.
- Crisis Text Line is a free, 24/7 support for those in any type of crisis. Text HOME to 741741 to text with a trained Crisis Counselor, who will invite you to share and will empathize, listen, and help you feel calm and safe.
- Look for support services in your community that can help you and your child through the grieving and healing process. Your local hospice agency, hospitals, and funeral homes should be able to direct you to organizations that may have grief support groups or other services.

Support for the Journey

You know your child best, and you are just what your child needs as you both grieve the loss. You are encouraged to reach out to your child’s school, your child’s doctor, or your priest or pastor for support from other adults in your child’s life. Professionals are available to help you if you are concerned about your grieving child and see any signs that worry you, such as the following:

- Nightmares about death
- Excessive nervousness or worrying (especially about their health and the health of loved ones)
- Difficulty concentrating or dropping grades in school

Remember, each child will grieve differently, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Letting your child know you are sad, too, can help them know their feelings are okay.

