

## Talking with Children about Death

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- Death should not be a “hush-hush” topic with children. Relying upon euphemistic phrases such as “she passed way” ... “He’s gone to sleep” ... are often more harmful than helpful. Death is a natural and normal consequence of living. It should not be a taboo subject for thought or discussion.
- Virtually every child will experience the death of a friend, a pet or a family member) or knows someone who has had such an experience and shared it with them). Children do develop thoughts and ideas about death at an early age. They also learn quickly who they can and cannot talk with about those thoughts and ideas.
- Ages 3-5: These children do not yet accept death as a permanent process. Death has an ending and they often ask questions such as...“When will Grandma come back?” They fear separation more than death.
- Ages 5-9: These children are beginning to understand that death is permanent, but it is not yet universal. Death is often personified and given powers to select those who are to die.
- Ages 9-12: Death, for these children, is permanent, personal and universal. They understand that they too will die someday. They are fascinated with the macabre and find details of death events appealing.
- Ages 12+: Most adolescents have reached adult levels of understanding about death. Many adolescents have very intense emotions about death and do spend time thinking about death.
- Children should be offered opportunities to talk about death and they experience it in their everyday world. The death of flowers, leaves, pets and relatives should be addressed as a natural occurrence in the science of life.
- Children should be included in the rituals of death whenever possible and appropriate. They should be offered the opportunity to participate if they so desire.
- Expressions of sadness and grief should be shared. They can participate in the support of family and friends and should be included in the family visits and conversations.
- Children’s questions about death should be answered as honestly as possible. It is important to try to discover what is behind the questions being raised and respond appropriately. Do not feel obligated to have all the answers. Sometimes wondering and exploring are more important than answering. Do not ignore questions, however. Some type of response is always needed as children will create answers for questions not heard and explored.