



HOW TO TALK WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

What is death? What does it look like for youth and young adolescents? How do we prepare ourselves in order to support youth? These are big questions that require more than a tip sheet to fully answer but we hope to provide a starting point for anyone caring for a grieving child.

We define grief from a death as all the thoughts, feelings and behaviors that we experience after someone dies. For youth and young adolescents, grief will look differently depending on their developmental stage and age as well as their relationship with the person who died.

As children move through infancy to adulthood, their brains go through extraordinary changes. With each stage of development, they mature physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually and in their use of language. Being conscious and mindful of their stage of development can help caregivers, professionals, teachers, etc., to:

- Talk with them about death.
- Understand their reaction to grief and loss.
- Support them through this difficult time.
- Help name what they may be experiencing emotionally and physically.

** It is important to keep in mind that even within these stages, each child is unique and their own person. Whatever their age and stage, environment and history can also play a role in their level of understanding (for example, when a child or teen has already experienced the death of a loved one or a cherished pet). Stages can also overlap and children can regress for various reasons.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS (0- 2 years)

- While infants and toddlers probably do not understand that someone is dying or has died, they are acutely sensitive to any change or disruption in their environment and routine.
- They are intensely aware of anything that affects their security, physical and emotional needs, including a caregiver's absence.
- Infants and toddlers feel comforted and secure when normal routines are continued as much as is possible and they are cared for with sensitivity.
- Although they probably have few or no memories of the person who has died, a bond can be nurtured as infants and toddlers age and grow by:
 - a) telling stories about the person
 - b) sharing photos or videos
 - c) describing the relationship, the child was too young to remember. For example,
- "Did you know Grandma used to love to bake?"
- "You have the same smile as your mom."
- "Your sister loved to tickle your toes when you were a baby."

PRE-SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN (2-4 years)

- Children continue to be sensitive to changes in caregivers, routine and environment.
- They start to understand death but do not fully understand that death is permanent.
- They can identify people who are special to their family.
- They learn about their world through their everyday events and storytelling.
- Pre-schoolers can be taught to understand what's happening when a family member's illness and dying is explained using simple, but honest, concrete language (dead, died, death instead of "went to sleep" or "went to a better place")
- It is helpful to repeat this information frequently so young children can hold on to this new knowledge.
- It is normal for children to continue asking where the person who died went.
- They begin to experience and learn about a wider range of feelings for which caregivers can provide guidance and soothing.
- They may use play to work through their experience of death and loss.

YOUNG CHILDREN (5-9 years)

- At this stage, children are still learning abstract ideas of space and time. (Even adults can have difficulty understanding "forever", or that a loved one is "gone" when they die.)
- They need help to understand why someone has died, and that "death" means the body stops working. (for example, explaining that the person no longer needs to eat, that their heart stopped working, they stopped breathing, etc.)
- The explanations must be repeated often before they come to understand that death happens to all living things and is irreversible.
- This can be frightening and overwhelming information for children as they start to realize everyone dies, that life is fragile and insecure
- Depending on their life experience of death and dying, this understanding comes at different ages for different children.

AGE 10 TO YOUNG ADULTHOOD

- A key stage of teenage development is moving toward independence from caregivers.
- Peers friendships are generally their main source of support and connection. A peer death for a young person can be very impactful even if family members did not know the friend.
- Teens may prefer to explore feelings and find formal support outside the home.
- Peer group grief programs are often of particular benefit to this age group.
- Memorials and rituals are very important. They may include social media tributes, wearing jewelry or clothing in memory of the person, or creating art/music of the person.

Grief is a personal journey that lasts a lifetime. Children can experience their grief in new ways with each stage of development. Keep in mind that their experiences as they grow can be triggered when they begin to understand new concepts like the finality of death or when they reach milestones such as graduation, moving through puberty, dating, or achieving something they worked hard for. Supporting your child through loss is ongoing. It requires many conversations and exploration of new ideas and feelings over time, and may include asking for support along the way from professionals.

WAYS TO SUPPORT:

- Invite children and youth to continue sharing their thoughts, feelings and questions with you about death and the person who died.
- Check in with them regularly; be sure to support and validate whatever they are feeling. Know that it is okay to show your feelings with your child as well. Children look to adults as models as to how they can grieve in a healthy way.
- Be proactive in acknowledging the death, especially with special occasions or holidays.
- Children and teens alike benefit from a diverse network of support as they process their grief at each stage, and as their connection to the person who has died evolves over time.
- Help them build connections with other adults and peers with whom they feel comfortable and safe to express their thoughts and emotions
- Connect them with other bereaved children and youth so they know they are not alone. This may be in a grief support group, a camp for grieving kids, or an online group.

Uplift Center for Grieving Children has curated a list of age-appropriate book recommendations that can help when speaking with children, youth, and teens about death.

Visit:

www.upliftphilly.org/programs/uplift-resources/book-recommendations/

For more information, contact:

Uplift Center for Grieving Children

www.upliftphilly.org

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OUR MISSION:

Uplift Center for Grieving Children helps children grieving a death to heal and grow through their grief while strengthening families, communities and professionals' understanding of how best to respond to their needs.

