uplift
Center for Grieving Children

Talking To Very Young Children About Death

Why?

Should I even talk about death with a very young child (ages 3-5)?

Young children grieve, too.
Young children notice and experience loss. They grieve, too. Grief looks different for everyone and is different at every stage of life. When someone close to a young child dies, the child needs the death to be addressed.

When a death *is* spoken about, the child then understands:

- It's hard but OK to talk about death and our reactions to it - they are part of us.
- The adults in my life can handle it, and therefore, so can I.

Children will make sense of the death with whatever information they have.
If that information comes from you or other supportive people, you help the child give shape to the meaning that death takes: i*t's difficult, it's upsetting, and we will get through it*.

BUT - if they don't get information from you or other supportive people, they will piece together whatever they can to help them make meaning of it. They will grasp at words or phrases they hear behind closed doors, said in whispers, or in the media - TV, movies, music. Their imaginations will give shape to death, and it may be scary, confusing, or just plain wrong.

SO - Let's help them get accurate, developmentally appropriate information so that they can make meaning that helps them feel safe.

Is the child too young to be told about the death?

If a child is old enough to love, they are old enough to grieve.

— Dr. Alan Wolfert, Founder of Center for Loss & Life Transition

How?

How do I talk about death with a very young child (ages 3-5)?

Be concrete, clear, brief, and simple.
Being vague, abstract, or using metaphors for death can confuse children and make it harder for them to process their grief. Using too many words can make them feel lost.

Avoid phrases that refer to death but don't explain it will confuse them, like *"he went to sleep"* or *"she moved on."* A child might imagine that sleeping leads to death, or that people leave because they no longer care about them. This isn't the case.

Their person died. Their heart stopped beating, they no longer breathe, and their body stopped working. Death doesn't hurt them, and we can still love this person, think about them, and talk about them, but they are no longer here with us laughing and eating and breathing and playing. And death means they can't come back.

SO - Tell them the truth, simply. Then ask if they have any questions.

Not knowing leads children to become anxious, bewildered and alone. They are left to seek answers on their own to important questions. This is an important time for gaining new information to help and reassure the child. It is because of this lack of knowledge and understanding that they especially need to talk about death.

— Uyntha Duncan, grief author

ALSO - Do share your family or culture's beliefs about death, if the child asks. These can give them something to grasp onto that you can share.

Let them lead.
Young children will take in as much as they can and not more. Offer them some information and let them ask for more. Adult pacing is different from young child pacing. Take their lead.

BECAUSE...
If they feel like they can pace the conversation, they will avoid feeling overwhelmed, and it will allow them to take in the information, digest it and integrate it.

Go slowly.
Each of us can only take in so much information at a time before it becomes overwhelming. Think of it like a meal: children need smaller pieces to chew on. Cut up the pieces into small, bite-size pieces and let them come back for more (conversation) when they're ready. Don't try to fit everything into one conversation. Just start by opening the door.

SEE - This video (1:58 minutes long) by *Sesame Street* is a great example of how to talk to a young child about death, and how to let them take the lead.

Validate feelings & be aware of guilt.
Make sure to validate all feelings a child expresses in their grief. The more the feelings are supported, the less scary they are to the child, and over time, the less they need to express them through their behavior.

SEE - This video (1:08 minutes long) by *Sesame Street*, which talks about big feelings around death.

ESPECIALLY - Children sometimes believe the death is their fault. This is a way of imagining they had some control over the situation. If it was their fault, they could have done something to stop it. This isn't true, but it can be a powerful belief in children (and sometimes adults).

SO - Validate that they feel this way and assure the child that the death is not their fault.

It's OK to not know.
It's okay if you don't know the answer to a question the child has. Be honest and let them know, "I don't know the answer to that." If it's something you can figure out, let them know you'll find out and come back to them. If it's not, tell them that as well, and show your own ability to cope with not knowing all the answers to everything. This is a fact of life, and it's OK.

What?

What is important when talking with a very young child (ages 3-5) about death?

Consistency & Care.
The most important thing for a grieving child, even a young one who can't verbalize their feelings, is a consistent caring presence. Can you be there for them as they demonstrate in their body and behavior that they are feeling the loss of their person? If you cannot, find someone who can.

BECAUSE... it is very important that the children have someone who knows what they're going through, and can acknowledge and validate their experience, as well as be a container for them when they are expressing their grief.

SO:

- Identify their emotions: *"Oh, it seems like you're feeling upset about this."*
- Share: *"I feel that way sometimes, too."*
- Validate: *"It makes sense. When someone dies, it can feel so upsetting."*
- Contain: *"I'm here for you while you feel upset. It's OK with me for you to feel your feelings."*

Encourage play.
Children process their experiences and heal through play. Encourage play and expressive arts (dance, music, art, sports, games). Let them reenact conversations, images, memories, or experiences about the death or their person through their play or art.

BECAUSE... this is a form of healing. It's how they make sense of what has happened to them.

Only when we begin to relate to the child on their level will the adult be able to help the child work their way through the grief process.

— Uyntha Duncan, grief author

Be aware of child development.
A young child does not have a grasp of the realities of death: that it is final, irreversible, what can cause it, and that it will happen to all of us at some point.

SO - Recognize that these are hard concepts to grasp and beyond the capability of a very young child. This is why it is important to be clear, concise, direct, and honest with them. This way, what they can understand leads to safety and not to the overwhelming feelings that come with abstraction and the wild places their imaginations can take them.

AND - As they grow, children will start to grasp the concept of death differently, and these conversations will continue to be important for them. Their grief changes as they grow, but your support can be there anytime.

Who?

Am I the right person to have this conversation with a very young child (ages 3-5)?

Children benefit from strong connections with multiple trusted adults. If you are someone they know and trust, you are a good person to have this conversation with them.

BUT - You don't have to be the only one. Talk to them about the other people in their life that they could talk with about the death as well. The less isolated a child feels in their grief, the better.

"Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve."

— Dr. Earl A. Grollman, grief counselor

AND - If you are grieving this person as well, and you don't feel you can have the conversation with the child, think about who else can, and invite them in or ask them for help in doing so.

BUT - Remember, it's OK for a child to see that you feel things in your grief too. Modeling for them how to identify a feeling and let it be is extremely beneficial for them as they watch and learn from us. "I'm crying because I feel sad that this person has died. Sometimes when we're sad we cry, and that's OK." Also, assure the child that it is not their responsibility to take care of the adults.

When?

When is the right time for a conversation about death?

Sometimes there's no right time. When possible, conversations about death should take place when a child is most settled, fed, rested, and when there isn't something they need to do immediately following so that they have time to process.

AND - Let the first conversation be an opening; tell them - and show them - that there is room for more conversations when they want to have them.

BUT - A very young child may sense that others in the family are upset. It's important to start a conversation before a big gathering happens. Seeing others upset and not knowing why can be scary for a very young child.

Adults can be helpful to the child by the way that they respond to death. When adults express openly their thoughts and feelings, then children will feel free to also express themselves.

— Uyntha Duncan, grief author

Where?

Is there a good place to have this conversation?

If you can, sit down with a child somewhere they feel safe and comfortable because the conversation can be scary and uncomfortable for both of you.

ALSO - For young children, it may be helpful to have something they can do with their hands while they listen, so that they can choose how much to take in with their eyes and ears. Give them paper and something to color with, or a ball to roll back and forth on the floor while you talk. Doing something while talking can be less overwhelming for some children.

You can't protect your kids from the pain of loss, but you can help build healthy coping skills.

— Rachel Ehmke, ChildMind Institute

Things To Remember

Grief is physical (body), behavioral (acting out), emotional (feelings), and cognitive (thinking).

In very young children (ages 3 to 5), you may see:

- Tantrums, clinginess, and moodiness
- Skill regression - kids may have more trouble walking, talking, toileting
- More separation anxiety - death is a separation and can provoke anxiety about separation in general
- Repetitive questioning - sometimes they need to hear an answer many times before integrating
- Questions about their own mortality. This is normal. Be honest and simple. Remember everything living will someday die. Help them see death in the normal context of life (flowers, bugs, and animals).

Reassure children that they are safe and cared for.
Show them this by making sure there is someone who can offer this to them as much as possible. They need this so that they can grieve.

Keep their routines as much as possible.
Consistency communicates safety. When they know what to expect, they feel safe. Feeling safe allows them to continue to explore their world and learn from it. You make this possible by keeping whatever normal pieces of their routine you can in the first few days or weeks after someone dies.

When routines have to be interrupted, just be aware of it.
A child's routines may have to be interrupted after someone dies - childcare may change, everyone may be distracted or acting differently, or they may not go to the places or do the things that they normally do. This will be challenging for a very young child. Being aware of it can help you support them to be resilient in the face of difficulty by reassuring the child you are there for them (or someone else), that routines will return, and that you can handle any behavior they send your way. Their behavior can mean: "I am distressed!" (crying, acting out, clinging, etc.)

Inform other caregivers.
Inform any other caregivers (daycare/family/friends/preschool) of the death so that they can offer the child support as needed, as well as consider this when interacting with the child.

What To Do As a Caregiver

Share your own emotions - don't hide them.
If your feelings are overwhelming to you, they are likely to be overwhelming to the child. Find someone else who can be with the child while you take care of yourself, as much as you can.

Talk about the person who died.
This helps a child stay connected to the person and normalize loss. But don't share too much! Remember - take their lead. If they engage the conversation, continue it. If they act out, drop eye contact, or seem disinterested, don't push it. They will let you know when they're ready.

Model healthy grieving.
Children learn by watching! If you're not sure what healthy grieving looks like - consult with us or others. But remember: Feel your feelings, share them with those you can, find healthy coping tools that work for you, and know that grief is a process that lasts throughout our lives but changes over time. Practice patience.

Have compassion for yourself.
It's hard to take care of a grieving child, especially if you are grieving, too. Kindness to yourself is key. Visit our partners at **www.BereavedParenting.org** for free materials designed for caregivers.

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Resources used:

- Kronaizl, Sydney G., *Discussing Death with Children: A Developmental Approach,* Pediatric Nursing, January-February, 2019, Vol. 45, No. 1.
- NACG: The National Alliance for Children's Grief, *Talking to Children About Grieving,* 2020. **childrengrieve.org**
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, ***Helping Young Children with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers,* 2014.**
- *Duncan, Uyntha. Grief and Grief Processing for Preschool Children, Viewpoints,* November 1992.

Links to Videos:
***Uplift Series: Talking With Preschoolers About Grief* - YouTube Playlist**
- **Should I Talk to Very Young Children About Grief, And How?**
- **What Does a Grieving Child Look Like?**
- **Tips for Caregivers on Caring for Themselves**

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