

A RESOURCE  
FROM  
NAGC  
MEMBERS



National Alliance for  
Grieving Children

# TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH AND DYING





***Grief Talk*** is an initiative of the NAGC launched in the summer of 2020 aimed at encouraging and supporting honest conversations around the topics of death and grief. This initiative has produced the following resources:

*Talking to Children About Death and Dying*  
*Talking to a Child or Teen to Let them know Someone has Died*  
*Talking about End of Life Memorials and Rituals*  
*Talking about Grieving as a Family*

Visit [ChildrenGrieve.org](http://ChildrenGrieve.org) to find these and other resources.

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## Introduction

If you are raising or caring for a child or teen who has experienced a death, you may wonder how to share this news with them. It is perfectly natural to feel nervous or even fearful of talking with a child about this emotional topic! This resource was created to help you prepare for these conversations.

## Setting the Stage

Before initiating a conversation with the child, there are some general principles to consider. These

include: who will deliver the news, as well as when, where, and how the conversation takes place.

The person who shares the news should ideally be the person to whom the child feels the closest. This is often the parent/ parents, but not always.

If the parent is the person who has died, a grandparent, aunt/ uncle, or other relative may be called upon to talk with the child. If it is possible and feels right, another supportive adult who is well known to the child may also be invited to be present.



**REMINDER:** The person who shares the news should ideally be the person to whom the child feels the closest



Children often know more than we realize.



**Where and when the news is shared can influence how it is received.**

A calm, safe space where you will not be interrupted is ideal. This may be the child's home or another familiar place where they feel safe. You may consider having some comfort items present and available to the child—perhaps a pet, stuffed animal, or special blanket.

This person can be a resource and support for both the adult sharing the news and the child.

If you are the person who will be talking with the child, check in with yourself first—do you have support? Do you have the information you need to share this news/ start the conversation? **You are not expected to have all of the answers, but having enough information to begin the conversation is important.** You may spend some time imagining how the conversation might go, or even choose to practice with a friend or family member before talking with the child.

**The timing of when to approach this conversation is important to consider.**

Ideally, it is soon enough after the death to assure that they hear the news from you first, and not from a stranger or from social media. This allows you to control the message that is shared and build in time to support the child.

You will want to be as prepared as you can to answer questions and **provide space for the child to share and process their feelings.** Depending on the child's age and developmental level, this may or may not happen right away. Be aware that the child may have additional questions or have a need to lead the conversation.



**Allow time for questions and processing feelings.**

It is best to avoid bedtime or just before school.

Our instinct is often to protect the child from the truth, particularly with stigmatized (suicide, homicide, or drug overdose) or graphic deaths. However, children often know more than we realize.

Sharing information in small bits at a time can be very helpful. You do not need to share all of the details at once, as that can be upsetting or overwhelming, but what you do share should be true.

When you are with the child, you may choose to sit close to them and perhaps gently place a hand on their arm or back. Speak with a calm, compassionate tone and be prepared to be flexible to allow you to respond to the child.

Start simply and plan to layer on additional information over time. Provide the opportunity for the child to repeat their understanding of what they heard you say, then restate or clarify if needed. The most important thing you can do for



the child is to be present, kind, and compassionate.

### **Expectations Following the Conversation**

Sharing the news of the person's death is only the beginning of the conversation. As indicated above, the child may not be ready or able to ask questions or respond right away to the news of the death. Children respond to death very differently than adults.

Some children, especially younger children, may not respond as we might expect. They may not cry or even seem to understand what you have shared. Children often need to go away and be by themselves



#### **Remember, this is not a one-time conversation.**

You do not need to share all of the details at once. Provide opportunities for small conversations over time.



The most important thing you can do for the child is to be present, kind, and compassionate.

or play. A child choosing to play does not indicate that they did not understand or care about the death. In fact, play can be a powerful way for children to process the news.

**Provide opportunities for small conversations over time.** Invite the child to talk with you anytime and encourage their questions. If there are multiple children of different ages and different needs, they may each respond differently. Provide opportunities for each child to follow up one on one. This will allow them

each some special time to talk, ask questions, and begin to process the news.

The initial conversation about the death is the start of a lifelong conversation. You should be prepared to revisit the topic over time as the child grows and develops. Plan to check in with the child regularly to support them in navigating the difficult times ahead.



**Children respond to death very differently than adults.**  
Play can be a powerful way for children to process the news.



## Understanding Very Young Children

(Birth - 5yrs)

### **Normative Tasks of Development** (What very young children commonly do.)

- From birth to five years, old children move through several important tasks.
- During the first year of life, infants must learn to trust the adults in their lives – develop secure attachment
- Toddlers (1–3 years) begin to explore their world and learn that they can be independent and control their actions.
- Pre-schoolers are initiators, focusing on themselves and what they want and need.

### **Understanding and Response to Death**

- Awareness of death is directly influenced and limited by young children's ability to understand their world.
- Death is viewed as the absence of a parent or caregiver.
- Children may be preoccupied with who will take care of them.
- Children may see themselves as responsible in some way, for a death, and they do not yet recognize time and irreversibility of death.



## Sources of support

As parents or caregivers, you are the primary source of security for your children—your continued reassurance about your presence and support is crucial. Extended family such as grandparents and others may also provide important support, and you can discuss with them how they can be helpful.

## What They Need from Parents or Caregivers

- **Be a good listener.** In all of your communication, be sure to listen to what your child is experiencing and feeling and show that you understand.
- **Establish and maintain routines.** Offer reassurance about the predictability of events and family security and routines.
- **Recognize that very young child do not understand death as adults do.** When appropriate, gently explain what is happening. You can provide gentle repeating of the facts, knowing that time will help their child understand their loss.
- **Respond truthfully.** When asked questions, respond truthfully about death according to your own belief system.
- **Model healthy grieving.** When a child sees you being sad or expresses sadness, or other emotion, explain that you too are sad or experience similar emotions; sadness is one way people show they miss someone who has died.
- **Reassure children they are safe and cared for.** Describe and reassure that your family will experience a “new reality” and new routines and that they will be safe and cared for. One way to do this is to establish family life routines and special times to be together.
- **Allow and encourage children to play** and have fun when they want to.
- **Talk about the person who died.** Give children opportunities to learn and share about their person. Don’t be afraid to talk about the person that died.
- **Encourage expressive activities.** You might ask preschool children to draw a picture showing a memory of their person, follow up by asking them to tell you about the picture.
- **Include the child in the family rituals & mourning as appropriate for your culture.**
- **Be assured regressive behavior is natural.** When a child shows regressive behavior, show patience and understanding.



## Understanding School – Age Children

(6yrs-12yrs)

### Normative Tasks of Development

(What children commonly do.)

During this time, the critical task is developing competency and building a sense of pride and accomplishment in their schoolwork, sports, social activities, and family life.

### Understanding and Response to Death

- Awareness of death is influenced and limited by the school-agers' ability to think about their world.
- Many emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Explain that grief is a combination of reactions that one can have after someone has died—thinking about the person, feelings of sadness or anger, physical reactions such as tiredness, or an upset stomach. These reactions can come or go.
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be the anger children feel because an important person has died, but the anger that results when no one listens or talks to them or includes them in activities. Don't assume what prompts feelings, ask!
- Children may not see themselves as responsible for a death and recognize that death is irreversible.
- Children will be able to appreciate how the loss of an important person in their lives will affect them over time, weeks, or months but not the long term, life-long impact of a death.

## Sources of support

Although school and outside of family worlds are increasingly important, parents and family are still the school agers' primary source of support. Use outside resources as you feel you need to and be sure that your child is receiving the support they need from these resources.

## What They Need from Parents or Caregivers

- **Be a good listener.** Encourage their expression of what they are feeling, their concerns about their parent or caregiver's health, financial issues, etc. They also provide acceptance and reassurance as needed.
- **Respond to children's need for information about the death** – often the details – allowing them to build a sense of control. They may have a matter of fact reaction rather than an emotional one to the circumstances – what happened, when, where, more detail-oriented. Give factual answers to questions as best you can.
- **Recognize that children do not want to be different from other children** because of the death. So provide the support they need to continue their ongoing activities with their peers. Find grief support groups that are available.
- **Accept your children's open discussions about the deceased:** talking or joining with them, magical thinking, and concerns about their parent or caregiver's health or financial problems.
- **Appreciate that your child can simultaneously hold contradictory emotions** – sad about the death yet happy to take a special vacation.
- **Address how the death has and will affect their lives . . .** "who will help me with my homework?" Children need the reassurance of continuity in their world.
- **Help your children find the right balance between holding back emotions and the need for remembrance.** You can involve them in creating family rituals of remembrance.
- **Help them deal with separation anxiety** by fully preparing them for any future anticipated separations.
- **Create opportunities for children to remember and express their grief** and let the child choose how to be involved in the mourning and remembering rituals.
- **Establish ongoing family routines,** including positive times that you spend together as a family.



## Understanding Teenage Children

(13yrs+)

### **Normative Tasks of Development** (What teenagers commonly do.)

The adolescent years are the testing ground for the essential transition from child to adult. The critical task of adolescence is for teens to find out who they are and how they fit into their families, peer group, and the global community. There is an increasing influence of peers, school, and other adults in the community on their development, although the influence of family is still important.

### **Understanding and Response to Death**

- The teen's awareness and understanding of death is similar to that of adults. They can incorporate
- multiple causes and consequences of a death.
- Many complex emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Support them in understanding that grief is a combination of reactions that one can have after someone has died—thoughts about the person, feelings like sadness or anger, physical reactions such as tiredness, or an upset stomach. They can also experience more subtle emotions or regret, ambivalence, or relief. These reactions can come or go.
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be the anger a teen feels because an important person has died but the anger that he or she feels when no one listens or talks to them, or has eliminated them

from activities. Don't assume what prompts feelings, ask!

- Teens do not see themselves as responsible for a death but are apt to analyze information to determine who or what is responsible.



### Sources of support

Although peers and other adults become increasingly important, parents and caregivers continue to be critical sources of information and support

### What They Need from Parents or Caregivers

- **Be available to listen and talk.** Parents and caregivers can engage in detailed narratives of the death and related events.
- **Encourage involvement in positive family activities.** Although they are increasingly involved with peers and outside activities, your family's continuity as a safe place where people care about each other is very important to them.
- **Be aware of the intensity of a teen's grief experience.** They may express mood swings. Expect & accept mood swings. Allow hidden feelings unless there is a risk of harm.
- **Offer specific opportunities for expression of feelings and of remembrance** through writing, art, music, sports, etc.
- **Encourage their participation in peer support groups** if desired.
- **Support their unique identity development and independence.** Acknowledging their preference of spending more time with friends– balanced with continued involvement in family activities and family bereavement remembrances. Avoid escalation of conflict as they express their independent identity.
- **Consistently set appropriate limits.** Adolescents need these limits, although they may protest against them.
- **Avoid having them take on too much family responsibility** if it is at the expense of their independent development.
- **Encourage stress reduction.** Avoid getting them involved in solving stressful situations beyond their ability to control, such as conflicts between adult family members or financial problems.



# TALKING TO CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS ABOUT DEATH AND DYING

Communication with special needs children is as important as speaking with any child. As the parent of a special needs child, here are some points that guide your conversation.

## **Be honest.**

Honesty is the foundation of a trusting relationship between the caregiver/parent and child.

## **Use Appropriate Words**

Try to use appropriate words, such as “died” instead of “left” or “passed away”.



It is ok to use the word “sad” depending on the children’s relationship with the deceased.

## **Answer Questions**

Be prepared that children may ask the same questions several times.

## **Allow Expression**

Allow children to express their grief in whatever way makes sense for them. They may just want to ignore it and play. Find ways in which to help children grieve in appropriate ways.

Non-verbal children may express their grief through acting out or self-injurious behaviors. Provide them with activities and coping mechanisms to help them express their grief. For example, have them squeeze a stress ball or blow some bubbles.

**Explain Rituals and What to Expect**

Explain rituals in a more detailed manner. Step-by-step instructions about what happens during a memorial or remembrance service can be helpful. For example, "First, we are going to drive to the funeral home. When we get there, people in suits will help us park the car. They might even put a flag on the top."

**Practice the End of Life Ritual**

Make a practice drive or visit to the place where the deceased will be remembered or buried in advance of services.

Some children may have difficulty with emotional cues. Explain that they may see more crying, hugging, or sadness. Having a picture chart or symbol stix available can assist children with picking up emotional signals from others and respond appropriately

It might be helpful to have a checklist to help you remember the steps in the process. Even a picture book can be helpful.

**Do Remembrance Activities**

Some examples of remembrance activities to do with children are: wearing a piece of jewelry or clothing that belonged to the deceased; listening to the deceased favorite music; looking at a scrapbook of the deceased; and making a memory box in which children can add their own memories.

**Use Books**

Use books to help explain death to children or as a way to help them cope with the loss.



## 10 KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER WHEN TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH AND DYING

1

### **Grief is individual**

Children usually don't tell you they are grieving by what they say and do. No two children grieve the exact same way, but there are typical reactions that can help you know a child is grieving.

2

### **Use Simple, Clear Age-Appropriate Language**

The caregiver/parent should explain the death in a compassionate manner using age appropriate short, simple explanations in language children can understand.

It is important to use the right words to talk about the death, like "Mom **died** from cancer." Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, as they can confuse the children. This is key so that children do not associate the death with anything other than the reality of how it occurred.

3

### **Children want to be told the truth about the death**

It can be difficult to explain a stigmatized death to

a child, for example, death from a suicide or drug related death.

Our instinct is to protect the child from heart breaking situations, although it might be more comfortable for us to avoid these conversations, they are very important for the child's understanding.

4

### **Be honest**

Honesty is the foundation of a trusting relationship between the caregiver/parent and child. Lying to children about the circumstances of death can lead to bitterness and mistrust when children learn the truth. Let the child's questions guide what you share. Speak openly and honestly about the death. It is ok not to know all the answers.

5

### **Take Time to Prepare for Difficult Conversations**

Take some deep breaths and give yourself time to collect your thoughts. Think of this initial conversation as laying the groundwork, allowing the child to ask questions and exploring what the child is thinking. It is not the time to share all available information. Focus on ensuring they understand what was said and explain that the death was no one's fault.



6

**Accept this is an Ongoing Conversation**

Younger children might need to be told many times as they might ask over and over again how the person died.

7

**Listen**

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions and make judgments.

What's most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating.

Listening is a 2 way conversation. Sometimes the best response is to repeat what you hear them say—called “reflecting”—so that they know they have been heard. Listening to children, without jumping in to try to fix anything or make it better, is one of the best ways to help them feel heard and supported.

8

**Model Healthy Grieving**

Children look to their caregiver/parent as a role model for how people grieve. Share your feelings with them as long as they are relieved of the task of trying to “fix it.”

9

**Allow and Validate Emotional Expression**

It is important for grieving children to be able to express their grief and have it validated. Validation of grief reactions occurs when adults or peers in a child's life acknowledge what the child is feeling and allows the child the space needed to express his/her grief in the way that feels most natural to them as long as they are not hurting themselves or others.

10

**Grief is long lasting**

Grief is not an experience that children “get over” or “move on” from after a few weeks or months. Grief does not have a timeline, and it changes over the course of someone's life. It is OK for children to continue to grieve the loss as they grow and develop.



## When to seek additional support

After a death, it is important to monitor changes in frequency, intensity, and duration of family members' behaviors. Noticeable changes may require additional support from an experienced, trained professional.



Below are some examples of changes to look for:

- Inability to go to work or school
- Difficulties in relationships
- Sleep problems or nightmares
- Disproportionate anger or irritability
- Increased health issues
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm, suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideation

These changes can have an impact on the griever and the other family members. When changes in behavior go unnoticed and unaddressed, this can create an imbalance within the family. Addressing these changes will help create a supportive and safe environment for each member of the family.

Sometimes members in a family may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or even another person with a similar loss can help provide an added layer of support. These outside connections provide the griever with an opportunity to learn new perspectives on grief, coping, and healing.

Connecting with others allows the griever to share their story, understand that they are not alone, validate and normalize their experience. It is important to embrace a family members' readiness, as well as the type of support needed. Needs may vary among family members throughout their grief journey.

You can find additional support in your area by visiting [childrengrieve.org/find-support](https://childrengrieve.org/find-support).



Learn more at [www.ChildrenGrieve.org](http://www.ChildrenGrieve.org)