

Talking to A Child About Death

1. Take some time to explore your own concerns.

Kids are really good at picking up on adults' anxieties. If you are worried about death/dying, that is okay, but be honest about it, and seek support for yourself.

2. Use correct terms.

Instead of saying "passed away", use "died". This normalizes talking about death and allows the child's concrete brain to grasp the finality of death a little better.

3. Answer their questions.

When a child can't ask questions, they keep their questions to themselves, and when it is kept inside, it can grow and overwhelm their developing minds.

4. But only answer their questions.

Try not to go into more detail than they ask.

5. Ask them what they think.

If your child asks you a question, like "What happens when I die?", by asking "What do you think?" before giving your reply, you will gain more insight into the kind of information they are after. For example, if they say, "I think I go to heaven.", then you know they are after a spiritual/existential answer as opposed to what happens to the body, or whether you are still their parent.

6. Infuse your answer with safety.

Children are highly aware of their vulnerability. Therefore, no matter what you are talking about, reassure them that you and other adults have a plan and will take care of whatever happens.

7. It's okay to not know.

Kids are good at smelling insincerity. It is better to say, "I don't know" then to fudge an answer. Consider exploring the answer together.

8. Share your faith.

Research shows that regardless of what the spiritual/religious beliefs are, the more robust the belief is, the less death anxiety there is. If you hold spiritual/religious beliefs, infuse discussions about your beliefs into your death discussions. If you do not hold religious/spiritual beliefs, that's okay. Just be transparent, and again, infuse answers with safety.

9. Don't change the topic.

If you are talking about death with another adult, don't change the topic if your child comes in the room. They will get the message that death is taboo.

10. Allow your child to see you grieve.

By seeing you grieve, the child will come to see that there is space for all emotions and that they are not alone in the way they are feeling. However, if you are feeling overwhelmed by your emotions, like you might scream, it's best to excuse yourself, then, when you come back, infuse the interaction with safety. "Mommy just needed a minute, because Mommy was having big feelings."

11. Keep routines.

One of the best things you can give your child after a loss is to keep up with routines. Children need consistency and predictability.

12. Stay connected.

Don't withdraw from your child even if you are feeling like you don't know how to handle their grief. Just hold them and listen to them.

13. Be aware of child-parenting.

Children often go into caregiver mode when their parent is grieving. It is okay for your child to get you a kleenex or give you a soothing hug, but try not to let them parent you, such as taking on new chores or constantly trying to cheer you up. This can be difficult when you are grieving yourself, but it will amplify the child's insecurity in the long-run, because grieving children need to know that they *have* caregivers, *not be* the caregivers.

14. Self-care.

Death is an overwhelming topic, and if your child has suffered a loss, it's likely you have too. It is not just okay, it's essential that you take care of yourself as well. Seek out guidance and support. Eat as healthy as you can. Set healthy boundaries. Drink water.