

Key Points to remember when talking to children and teens about death and dying

Grief is individual. Children and teens usually do not tell you they are grieving by what they say and do. No two people grieve the exact same way, but there are reactions to help you know a child or teen is grieving.



Use simple, clear age-appropriate language. Caregivers should explain the death in a compassionate manner using age-appropriate short, simple explanations in language children and teens can understand. It is important to use the right words to talk about the death, such as “Mom died from cancer”. Avoid euphemisms like passed away or went to sleep, as they can confuse children and teens. This is key so children and teens do not associate the death with anything other than the reality of how it occurred.

Children and teens want to be told the truth about the death. Our instinct is to protect the children and teens from potentially difficult situations. Although it might be more comfortable for us to avoid these conversations, they are very important for the child or teen’s understanding. It can be difficult to explain a stigmatized death to a child or teen, for example, death by suicide or a drug-related death.

Be honest. Honesty is the foundation of a trusting relationship between a caregiver and child or teens. Lying to a child or teen about the circumstances of death could lead to bitterness and mistrust when they learn the truth. Let their questions guide what you share. Speak openly and honestly about the death. It is ok not to know all the answers.

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 or teen to ask questions and explore what they are thinking. It is not the time to share all available information. Focus on ensuring they understand what was said and explain the death was no one’s fault.

Accept this is an ongoing conversation. The initial conversation about the death is the start of an ongoing 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 the future.

Listen. When a child or teen is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions and make judgments. Remember to listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating.

Model healthy grieving. Children and teens look to their caregivers as a role model for how people grieve. Be open with your feelings and how you are being supported.

Allow and validate emotional expression. It is important for children and teens who are grieving to have the space 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 or teen is feeling and allow the child the space needed to express their grief in a way that feels most natural to them, as long as they are not hurting themselves or others.

Grief is long-lasting. Grief is not an experience children or teens "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 and teens to continue to grieve the loss as they grow and develop.

When to Seek Additional Support

After a death, it is essential 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

Sometimes family members may want to connect with others for additional support. Connecting family members with peer support groups, camps, conferences, or 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 people who are grieving the opportunity to share their stories, understand that they are not alone, and 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 www.nacg.org/find-support.