

How To Talk To Kids About Death

Discussing death with your kids can be a real concern. Death is however an inevitable part of life and it is our responsibility to ensure our kids are aware of it and know it's okay to discuss it.

If we allow children to talk to us about death, we can give them needed information and help them when they are upset. We can encourage their communication by showing attention and respect for what they have to say. We can also make it easier for them to talk to us if we are open, honest, and at ease with our own feelings.

When talking about death, use simple, clear words. To break the news that someone has died, approach your child in a caring way. Use words that are simple and direct.

Listen and comfort. Every child reacts differently to learning that someone has died. Some kids cry. Some ask questions. Others seem not to react at all. That's OK. Stay with your child to offer hugs or reassurance. Answer your child's questions or just be together.

Put emotions into words. Encourage kids to say what they are thinking and feeling in the days, weeks, and months following the loss. Talk about your own feelings: It helps kids be aware of and feel comfortable with theirs. Say things like, "I know you're feeling very sad. I'm sad, too."

Tell your child what to expect. If the death means changes in your child's life, head off any worries or fears by explaining what will happen.

Help your child remember the person. In the days and weeks ahead, encourage your child to draw pictures or write down favorite stories. Don't avoid mentioning the person who died. Recalling and sharing happy memories helps heal grief and activate positive feelings.

Respond to emotions with comfort and reassurance. Notice if your child seems sad, worried, or upset in other ways. Ask about feelings and listen. Let your child know that it takes time to feel better after a loved one dies. Some kids may temporarily have trouble concentrating or sleeping, have fears or worries, or have physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches. School counselors can help kids who need more support.

Help your child feel better. Provide the comfort your child needs. After a few minutes of talking and listening, shift to an activity or topic that helps your child feel a little better. Play, make art, cook, or go somewhere together.

Give your child time to heal from the loss. Grief is a process that happens over time. Be sure to have ongoing conversations to see how your child is feeling and doing.

Healing doesn't mean forgetting about the person. It means remembering the person, and letting memories stir good feelings that support us as we go on to enjoy life.

No matter how children cope with death or express their feelings, they need sensitive responses from adults. Careful listening and observing are important ways to learn how to respond appropriately to a child's needs. It is important to help children understand the realities of death and grief. Sharing feelings between you and your child will benefit you both.