



**East Cheshire
Hospice**

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Talking to Children About Death

A guide for parents and guardians.



Talking to children about death

How do we begin to approach this scary and unwanted topic with a child? As adults we can be very scared about approaching this topic, but children deserve our honesty and support through this scary and lonely time. This information may help you to work out when and how to approach this subject.

Why do we need to talk about death?

Well, it's part of life, and a natural event that will happen to all of us. Children actually confront loss all throughout their lives, when they move house, or a school, when a pet dies, it's something we must pass through, not around or under or over but through and done with the help of an adult they trust and love these things help prepare children for how to manage a big loss when it happens. They can take in the information bit by bit and their learning grows over time. So, ideally we actually talk about death and dying all through their lives, just like we talk about other subjects.

“As a parent, it's my responsibility to equip my child to do this - to grieve when grief is necessary and to realize that life is still profoundly beautiful and worth living despite the fact that we inevitably lose one another and that life ends, and we don't know what happens after death”. Sam Harris.

And yet, I have found that most people find it incredibly hard to talk to children about grief and loss. Many try to make it less painful, less raw, or ignore it all together. How human to want to protect your child, from that pain

you yourself have felt and hated. Yet when we do this, we leave a child alone, unable to talk about the fears and feelings that may at times feel overwhelming, and because they have such beautiful imaginations, they may well try to make sense of this by coming up with ideas that are even worse than what is happening!

Children as young as 2 and 3 may start to ask you about death, and this is a wonderful time to start to explore the idea with children, to help them understand what loss is and ways we may start to cope with it. For example my own three year old the other day asked, “mummy are you going to die?” my reply was “yes, one day we all die darling, but I hope that it will not be for a long long time”, him “but that makes me very sad mummy, look I have tears” gave a big hug and an acknowledgement that this too makes me sad, but that we hold each other’s memories and love in our hearts and always will no matter what happens.

We often read *No matter what* by Debbie Gliori with its beautiful passage at the end assuring my children they will be loved no matter what;

“Large held Small snug as they looked out at the night,
At the moon in the dark and the stars shining bright.
Small, look at the stars – how they shine and glow,
But some of those stars died a long time ago.
Still they shine in the evening skies love, like starlight,
never dies”

Or the wonderful comic book style *When dinosaurs die* by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown Exploring what death is and the ceremonies and questions around it.

Yes my children will be sad, but this is so human and if we can start to discuss loss at this age, and when they are calm and safe, they can process this information far better and be far better prepared, for the inevitable time in life when they experience a loss. As we know, that going through loss is like going through any trauma, the brain starts to operate in survival mode, which can make taking in new information difficult (one of the reasons many children may struggle at school during this time), so not the best time to start to give them new learning and information. Far better to be able to draw on what we know.

Talk to children about this subject, to allow it to become part of our conversations, not just at those difficult times, but throughout our lives. To bring children on this journey with us, even when it is into the unknown and scary places like grief, as they will go on that journey regardless, but it's better they do it with a trusted adult by their side to help guide them.

“The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares”. Henri Nouwen

Children are far more perceptive than we sometimes realise and if we don't tell them the truth and let them know what is going on, they can make up some scary stories for themselves. Children, especially young children are very self-orientated; the world revolves around them, so any difficulty they automatically assume does too. If mum and dad are arguing, crying, if the house seems

tense and scared they often think “it must be my fault”. You know those times when you have walked into a room, known something is up but not known what!

That feeling of discomfort that comes, and then if it continues the feeling of confusion and not knowing what to do... well if we don't explain what is happening to a child that's how it is for them. Except we as adults and carers are the people they rely on and need to be able to trust in order to explore the world safely, so if we don't tell them the truth or leave them alone in the dark, they learn not to trust us, and that is a scary place to be for a child. So if we can find the courage to include the children, to be honest to the questions they pose, then at least through all the pain and sorrow, they know they can still trust you and they at least feel they can talk to you, or come to you for cuddles and to cry if they need to. Instead of being alone in the dark, they are in it together with you holding their hand.

Often going through a grief, whilst we would prefer it never happen, can show us the true resilience of our children and leave them with a profound empathy and compassion for others suffering and the strength to know they have survived this and can call on that strength to survive other challenges in life.

How do we talk about it?

With honesty given in a way that your child will understand, including them in the journey, both the sadness and the joy. You know your child better than anyone so allow your knowledge to guide you, past experience may have given you some indication of how they will handle and manage the situation. But sometimes that is scary. We want to protect children from pain and suffering, but sometimes in the world, sadly there is no way to avoid it, and if we take the risk of allowing the child into what is a scary and uncertain place, often they will surprise us by their resilience and ability to cope.

Find a way of talking to your child, that works for you as a family. That might be using stories, art, sitting talking for a few moments and coming back to it later (young children in particular can't take a lot of information in at one go and need it to be given in small chunks, over and over again at different times), it might be playing it out with dolls or puppets, or relating it to a storyline on TV they have watched... the ways you can do this are endless and as unique as your family and child.

A good tip is if they are willing to get them to explain back to you what it is they understand – so that you can get an idea of what it is they heard and have taken in. But never force information on a child, if they don't want to know that's ok too, but also never underestimate how much a child can take in and hear whilst seemingly ignoring you and playing in the corner!

I often work with families and I will be explaining something seeming to the back of a child's head as they move around the room, with mum saying "are you

listening to the lady?” but I allow them to do that, as the fact they are staying close and quite, usually means they are listening, and later on, when they are ready they often ask the questions that show they were in fact taking it in.

My underlying message is this... Be guided by your child

Saying goodbye

To have to face saying goodbye to everyone and everything you love – Including your child is so, so incredibly hard.

How you approach this can range from ignoring it completely and not wanting to talk about it or face it right through to saying goodbye, planning your own funeral, making memory boxes and writing letters for the years to come, so your child can get a real sense of who you are and that you are there beside them or in their hearts even if you are not physically present.

As with all the information here – it's up to you – nobody else can decide what is right or wrong for you but perhaps talk to someone close to you, your partner, or your health care provider or a therapist to help you work out how you want to say goodbye and what you want to leave behind.

As facing this alone is so, so scary and you are also going to be grieving all that you are losing as well as facing your thoughts about dying and your child's future. If you're unsure – I suggest always allowing a child to lead by giving them choices, do you want to visit mummy? What songs would you like to have at daddys funeral? Do you want to see gran get her hair cut? What

shall we do together today? Would you like to know more? Do you have any questions? That way when they are older, there will be less chance of regrets and resentment that they were not allowed that goodbye or those treasured moments together.

Dying is always a tough subject and all the above applies – but the questions that bring up the most fear seem to be – should I allow a child to be there when the person they love is dying and what about the funeral? Well, again, you know your child best, but once again choice plays a big part... Ask a child, involve them to the extent they want to be involved, being prepared to know that if your child changes their mind, there is someone and somewhere they can go instead. Some children really value and want to be part of the whole process, including seeing what that person looks like after she has died and being at the funeral, others do not, both are ok, we all grieve in our own ways and children are no different. If we accept their choices without judgement then they know that you are there for them to talk to and cry with regardless and that they are safe to explore their choices and change their minds. Children of different ages do respond differently – younger may not understand what death is and benefit from books and explanations that allow them to explore this – but still its only when mum does not come back for that birthday or has been gone away much longer than usually, that they start to really understand and grieve that she is not returning. Some children really want to explore the details of it, what happens to your body when you die, what is cremation and where do you go?

If you can answer them, if it's too hard and upsetting for you – find someone you trust who can.

But remember children learn most from you – so model that it is ok to cry and to grieve and to look after yourself – they don't have to be strong all the time, and neither do you!! Also allow them space to be happy, young children can't handle long periods of grief, so may seem to jump in and out of it – one moment consumed with grief, the next acting like it never happened and completely joyous about the snowman outside!! It's not because they don't care – it's just children don't have the same emotional capacity we have to stay in grief for long periods. They may also revisit their grief as they grow and their understanding grows and deepens, what they understood aged 3 is very different from what they understand aged 13 – so they may grieve over again with this new understanding. The other big thing I would suggest is don't use metaphor – we want to make this easier so it's natural to want to avoid words like dying or death, but it can be confusing for a child. E.g. she has gone to sleep can leave a child terrified of going to sleep or mum has gone away – well why what did I do that's so bad she left me?

But we all have different beliefs about death and dying, honour your own and find the way that fits for you to tell your child, perhaps also acknowledging that we don't ever know for sure and there are lots of other beliefs out there – so that when they get older they can feel free to discuss that with you too.

Lastly if you know you're dying, maybe make a memory box, or book with your child, collect memories and wonderful times together, in fact, making memories with your child in all sorts of forms is good even if you're not dying – it's going to happen to us all someday and to have that special box or scrap book is a priceless gift to a child regardless of what lies ahead. And if a parent dies and we didn't get to do that for whatever reason – then make time to do that with them, make it a special time to collect together and talk together of the person you are all missing, a time when you can bring that special person alive again in your hearts, to cry and laugh and share.

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.”

Helen Keller

- Its ok to be sad – don't try to fix it just listen and be there. Its also ok to show your sad
- Don't avoid the subject – its ok to say your don't know what to say and that's better than ignoring it!
- Children will know something is going on, even if you don't tell them
- Use simple direct language – but check out with the child after what they understood – don't use metaphors like gone to sleep or passed away
- Sometimes many short conversations are better than one long one
- Involve children in the journey, including goodbyes ask them how much or how little they want to included.
- Memory boxes and books can be a good way of remembering loved ones.

R.A.I.N.

R – Recognise how your child is feeling e.g. “your sad and angry that this is happening”.

A – Allow and accept how they feel, don't try to fix it or change it or make it better.

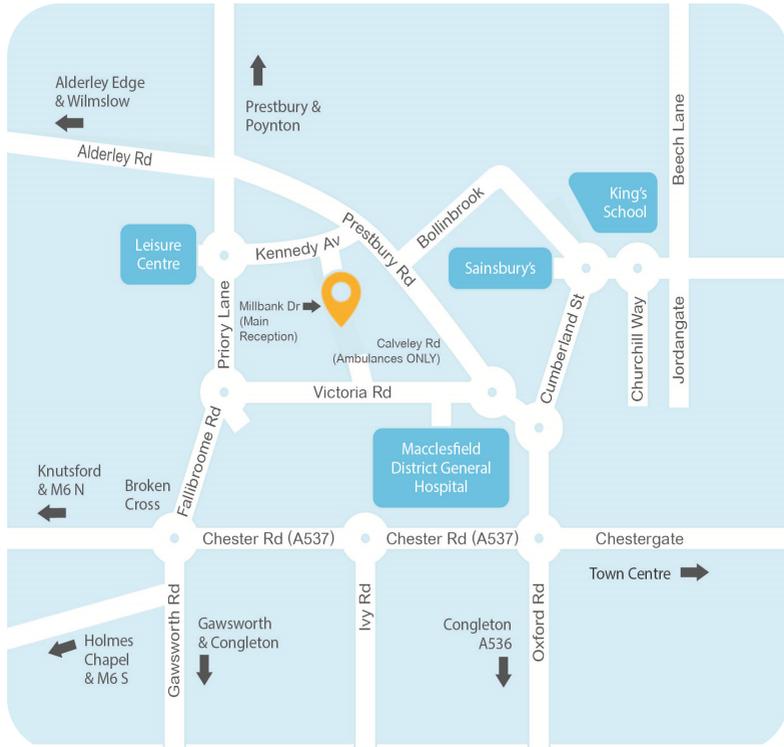
I – Interested – show your interested and listening, e.g. I hear how hard that feels for you. Or How does that feel? What was it like when you heard that? How can I help?

N – nothing more and nothing less – sometimes we underestimate the power of just being with someone and being willing to listen and just let them be sad, angry, scared or whatever feeling they are feeling. Remember this is a gift and often very healing.



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