

Helping your preschool child cope with a death

The death of a loved one can be a stressful event for you and your child. You may think, “How can I help my child understand and cope when I am having trouble myself?” This person could be a friend or a family member, and the death could be the result of a serious illness or an accident. No matter what the cause, you may want support in helping your child through this loss.

Many different staff members can help your child deal with the death of a friend or family member. A certified child life specialist is one of the team members who will work closely with your family. Child life specialists can help your child understand death and teach ways to cope with the loss. They can also support you in talking with your child about death. When needed, a child life specialist can give you resource materials about grief and bereavement that fit your child’s age. If you are at home and feel that your child needs more support, please call on local support services such as a grief counselor, chaplain, social worker or psychologist.

Understanding death

Helping your preschooler understand death will help him or her cope better. If you do not explain death to your child in simple, honest terms, he or she will be left to imagine what has happened. These thoughts can often be scarier than the truth.

Your preschool child may not understand the concept of “forever” and may think that death will only last for a short time. Or, he or she may think that people who die return soon, the way cartoon characters do.

Your child might also believe that he or she has done something to cause the death. (Example: I told my friend that I didn’t want to play with him anymore, so he died.)

How to say it

- Use concrete words such as “dead” and clear wording, like his or her “body stopped working.”
- Avoid phrases such as “passed away,” “gone to sleep” or “taken to a better place.” These concepts are hard for a preschooler to understand.
- Remember to include your religious beliefs when you discuss death with your child. However, avoid saying that God “took someone to be with him.” Your child may begin to fear that God will take him or her away, too.

Possible questions

Your child might have many questions about death. Be sure to answer those questions honestly, using words he or she can understand. Also, remember that it is OK if you do not have all the answers.

Here are some questions your preschool child might ask when a family member or friend has died. We also offer some possible answers.

What does “dead” mean?

“Dead” means that the person’s body stopped working. His or her heart stopped beating, and he or she does not breathe anymore. He or she does not see, hear, feel or move anymore.

Is death like going to sleep?

Death is different from sleeping. When you are sleeping, your body still works. You still breathe, your heart beats, and your body can still move. When a person dies, his or her body stops working.

Keep in mind: Children who are told that death is like sleeping may develop fears of going to sleep and not waking up.

Is he or she hungry? Is he or she cold?

Young children often do not understand that a dead person no longer has feelings. You may need to tell your child many times that the person’s body does not work anymore, and that he or she does not breathe, move, talk or feel anymore.

Will he or she come back?

“Forever” is a concept young children find hard to understand. You may need to tell your child many times that the person will not ever come back.

Did I do something bad to cause the death? Did I think something that caused it?

It is very common for preschool children to feel at fault for death. Your child may have had a fight with the person who died and may have wished that person would go away before the death. It is important to reassure your child that nothing he or she could have said or done caused the person to die. Thoughts and words cannot make people die.

Common reactions

Every child responds to death in his or her own way. These are some of the most common preschool reactions:

- Acting irritable
- Regressing to an earlier age (bedwetting, thumb-sucking, baby talk)
- Showing fear of separating (clingy)
- Having increased fears or nightmares
- Talking about death over and over (which might even take place at odd times)
- Showing little to no concern at times and returning to play.

Ways to help

- Be patient and repeat details about how death is “forever.”
- Make sure your child knows that nothing he or she could have said or done could have caused or prevented the death.
- Use straight-forward, concrete words to talk about death. Avoid phrases such as “passed away.”
- Be honest and answer your child’s questions. It is OK if you do not have all the answers.
- Set limits for behaviors that are not acceptable. But know that your child might act younger than his or her age while trying to cope with this death.
- Give your child chances to play and draw to express feelings about the death.
- Read books about death and loss that fit your child’s age. You can find these books at your local library or bookstore. Some titles that may be helpful for your preschooler are:
 - *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown
 - *I Miss You: A First Look at Death* by Pat Thomas
 - *So Much to Think About: When Someone You Care About has Died* by Fred Rogers
- Model healthy grieving. It is OK for your child to see you cry.
- You may find these books helpful when preparing your child for a death:
 - *Preparing the Children: Information and Ideas for Families Facing Terminal Illness* by Kathy Nussbaum
 - *Living the Dying Process: A Guide for Caregivers* by Jody Gyulay

Questions?

If you have concerns about how well your child is adjusting to the death of someone close, please contact the Child Life department at (916) 703-3024.