

How to Talk to Children About Death

What to say, what not to say, and why honest language matters

An Age-by-Age Guide

Children deserve honest information about death, delivered in language they can understand. Research consistently shows that using direct, concrete language—rather than euphemisms—helps children process loss more effectively and reduces anxiety.^{1,2} This guide provides age-specific scripts and strategies based on developmental research from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Sesame Workshop, and peer-reviewed studies.

Infants & Toddlers (0–2 years)

What they understand: They cannot understand death but sense changes in routine, emotion, and the absence of a familiar person. They respond to the distress of caregivers around them.^{1,3}

<p>What to Say</p> <p>"I'm here. You are safe." "Mama is sad, but I love you." Use a calm, soothing voice and hold them close.</p>	<p>What NOT to Say</p> <p>"Nothing happened" (they sense it did) Hiding your emotions entirely Changing caregivers abruptly</p>
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Tip: Maintain routines as much as possible. Physical comfort—holding, rocking, skin contact—is the most important intervention at this age.

Preschool (3–5 years)

What they understand: They engage in magical thinking and view death as reversible or temporary. They may believe their thoughts or wishes caused the death. They will ask the same questions repeatedly—this is normal processing.^{1,2}

<p>What to Say</p> <p>"Grandma's body stopped working and she died." "Dead means the body doesn't breathe, eat, or move anymore." "It's not your fault. Nothing you did or said made this happen." "It's okay to feel sad. I feel sad too."</p>	<p>What NOT to Say</p> <p>"Grandma went to sleep" (creates fear of bedtime) "God took her" (creates fear of God) "She went on a long trip" (why didn't she say goodbye?) "We lost grandma" (then let's find her!)</p>
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Tip: Answer questions each time they ask. Repetition is how preschoolers process new information. Include them in age-appropriate rituals.

School Age (6–9 years)

What they understand: They begin understanding death is permanent but may personify it (ghosts, grim reaper). They may become curious about the biological details of death. Magical thinking may persist—some believe death only happens to old or bad people.^{1,3}

What to Say

"Dad died because his heart was very sick and stopped working."
 "Dying is not contagious—you can't catch it like a cold."
 "You can ask me anything, even the hard questions."
 "Would you like to draw a picture or write a letter for Dad?"

What NOT to Say

"Don't worry about it" (dismisses valid fears)
 "Be strong for your mom" (suppresses grief)
 Avoiding their questions about biological details
 Hiding your grief entirely from them

Tip: This age responds well to memory-making activities. Let them participate in funeral decisions if they wish. Model healthy grief.

Preteens (9–12 years)

What they understand: They understand that death is final, universal, and will happen to everyone—including themselves. This can trigger significant anxiety. They want facts and details. Some may view death as punishment.^{1,3}

What to Say

"She died from cancer. The doctors did everything they could."
 "It's normal to feel angry, scared, or even relieved."
 "Your life will look different now, but you won't go through this alone."
 "What questions do you have? There are no wrong ones."

What NOT to Say

"You're the man/woman of the house now" (too much burden)
 "They're in a better place" (minimizes the loss)
 "At least they're not suffering" (too soon for perspective)
 Withholding cause of death (they'll find out anyway)

Tip: Preteens need factual honesty. Address practical fears directly: Who will take me to school? Will we move? Give them constructive outlets like sports or journaling.

Teenagers (13–18 years)

What they understand: They understand death as adults do but struggle with existential meaning. They may prefer to process with friends rather than parents. They search for meaning behind the death and may question spiritual beliefs.^{1,3}

What to Say

"I want you to know exactly what happened. Ask me anything."
 "There's no right way to grieve. Whatever you're feeling is valid."
 "I'm grieving too. We can get through this together."
 "Would you like to talk to a counselor? It's not a sign of weakness."

What NOT to Say

"I know how you feel" (you don't—their loss is unique)
 "You need to be strong" (permission to break down is essential)
 "Get over it—it's been months" (grief has no timeline)
 Monitoring their every emotion (give them space)

Tip: Let teens lead the conversation. Respect their need for privacy while keeping the door open. Watch for warning signs: substance use, isolation, reckless behavior.

Words and Phrases to Avoid

- **"Passed away" / "Passed on"** — Abstract and confusing; young children don't understand the metaphor.
- **"Gone to sleep"** — Can cause terror at bedtime. Children may fear they or a loved one will die in their sleep.
- **"Lost"** (as in "We lost him") — Children will want to search for the person. Creates confusion and false hope.
- **"Gone to a better place"** — Children may wonder: Why didn't they take me? Was here not good enough?
- **"God took her" / "God needed an angel"** — Can instill fear of God or fear that God will "take" them too.
- **"They're watching over you"** — Some children find this creepy rather than comforting. Use only if the child finds it helpful.
- **"Be strong" / "Big boys don't cry"** — Teaches children to suppress grief, which increases risk of complicated grief later.

Use Direct, Honest Language

- **Instead of "passed away,"** say: "She died."
- **Instead of "gone to sleep,"** say: "His body stopped working."
- **Instead of "we lost him,"** say: "He died, and we won't see him again."
- **Instead of "don't cry,"** say: "It's okay to cry. I'm crying too."

Sources:

1. Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia — Explaining Death to a Child: <https://www.chop.edu/health-resources/explaining-death-child>
2. NPR / Sesame Workshop — How to Talk With Children About Death: <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/04/698309351/the-dog-isnt-sleeping-how-to-talk-with-children-about-death>
3. Gheshlagh et al. (2023). Understanding the Childhood Grief. Int J Prev Med, PMC 10580192: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10580192/>
4. Frontiers in Psychiatry (2021). Developmental Understanding of Death and Grief Among Children: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8511419/>