



# Discussing death and grief with your child

When talking about death with children, it's important to remember that every child is different, and your approach may need to be tailored to your child, the circumstances, and your beliefs. It is important to build in time and space and encourage children and young people to ask questions. Try to answer them simply and honestly, and use language that is appropriate to their stage of development. While we may naturally want all the answers, it's okay to admit when we don't know something and respond with a simple "I don't know."

Please keep in mind that this document provides suggestions to guide your thinking and help you navigate these conversations. By reading through them, you can gain insight into how to respond in a way that is both brief and empathetic. Your warmth, understanding, and willingness to listen are vital in supporting children through their understanding of death and any grief they experience.

## Helpful Reminders

It is not unusual for young children to ask the same question again and again.

Repeating questions and getting answers helps children to process and come to terms with what has happened.

Be simple and straightforward when answering children's questions. Avoid euphemisms or abstract language which can be confusing.

Navigating conversations about death and trauma can be difficult. There is no such thing as 'perfect'. Be gentle with yourself and do what you can.

## Guidelines for talking to your child

**Personalise your words** and acknowledge the person who has died. Here are some general, simple words you can use:

- *I am so sorry you feel sad and upset.*
- *Please know I'm here for you whenever you need to talk, cry, or simply have some quiet company.*
- *It's hard to make sense of what happened. I'm here to help in any way I can.*

**Ask open-ended questions** such as:

- *What kind of thoughts and feelings have you had today?*
- *How are you doing? How are you coping with these thoughts and feelings?*
- *Is there anything specific that comes to mind that I can do to help you?*

**Accept and validate whatever feelings are expressed** without arguing or minimising them. All feelings are ok. If appropriate, you can suggest constructive outlets for strong emotions, such as writing in a journal, seeking support from a counsellor, or engaging in activities that provide comfort such as drawing, gentle exercise, reading or listening to music.

**Normalising their feelings and thoughts** assures them that difficulties concentrating, lack of enjoyment, anger, decreased energy, and other emotions are normal responses that will gradually subside with time.

**Encourage your child to channel their emotions** through creative outlets like art, play, or physical activities that release pent-up energy and emotions.

**Set a healthy example** for your child by expressing your own feelings, seeking additional support if necessary, and taking care of your emotional wellbeing.

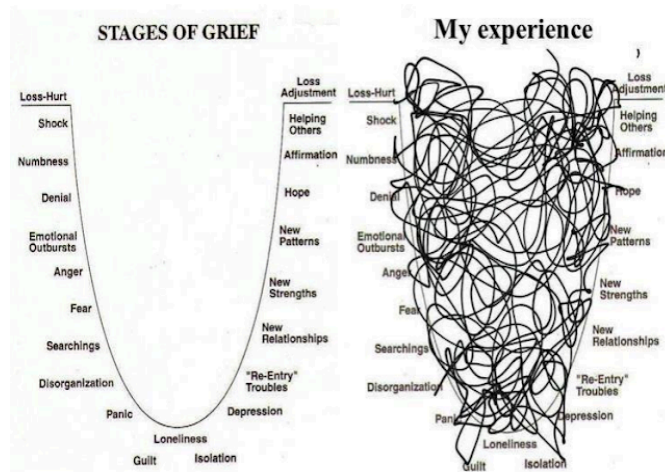
## Questions Your Child May Ask

Children will ask questions about death differently depending on their developmental stage. Below are a range of questions that your child may have:

**“I feel (any emotion or thought). Is that OK?”**

*Absolutely. Everyone deals with death differently, and all emotions are OK. There are no wrong feelings to have. Sometimes, we will laugh; sometimes, we won't feel much; sometimes, we may cry. It is important to listen to all your feelings. Other people may react differently to us, and this is ok.*

For older children, this picture can help explain the range of things we might feel even in one day or one hour:



### **“What is death?”**

*Death happens when someone’s body stops working. Their body stops working, and they no longer breathe, move, eat or drink. They can’t feel anything when they’re dead, so it doesn’t hurt, and they’re not in pain. They can’t come back to life once they’re dead.*

Do not compare death to sleeping as this might create a fear of sleeping.

### **“Why do people die?”**

*People die because sometimes their bodies stop working. It can happen when people get very old, very sick, or have accidents. Dying is a natural part of life, even though it can be sad and hard to understand. We can remember our good times with them and keep them alive in our hearts and memories.*

### **“When do people die?/ When will I die?”**

*Many people die when they’re very old, and their body is worn out like great-grandparents. But not everyone who dies is very old. Sometimes, babies can be born sick, and they die. In very rare situations, like now, accidents can happen, and people of any age can die, but most people die when they are very old.*

If a child reveals insecurity about the future:

*Even though nobody knows the future, there will always be reliable adults to look after you.*

### **“Did it hurt when they died?”**

*When [name of the person who has died] died they were in the hospital being looked after by doctors who are experts at making sure they are as comfortable as possible. This care often*

*includes giving them medicine to help with any pain. So, the doctors would have done everything they could to make sure they didn't feel any pain when they died.*

**“Will I die?”**

*Yes, everyone dies; it's part of life. We all die, usually when we are old. You won't die just because someone you know has died.*

**“What happens after death?”**

*No one knows for sure what happens after someone dies. Different people have different ideas and beliefs, although many share some of the same ones. I think...<explain beliefs> ..but you may have a different opinion.*

**“Why could the doctors not fix them?”**

*The person who died was in an accident. Their body was very badly hurt. The doctors worked very hard and tried their best to help them but unfortunately, their injuries were too difficult to fix.*

**“What happened? Why was there.... <physical description of the injuries>”**

*You may have questions and concerns about what happened during the accident. It's completely normal to feel curious and confused when something unexpected or scary happens. It can be shocking to see or hear about these injuries.*

If children ask about specific injuries, you can answer with plain factual information e.g. *When we get hurt or injured, we can get cuts or bleed. If we have a small injury we can get a small amount of blood which can usually be wiped away or covered with a plaster. When there is a big accident, there can be more blood.*

**“Whose fault was it?”**

*This is a good question and other people may be asking or thinking about this too. We don't know exactly what happened. The police will be trying to find out what happened and we must let them do their job. It's not helpful to make guesses about what happened as this can be upsetting for the family of the person who died. We may never know exactly why things happened. Sometimes accidents just happen.*

**“Will there be more accidents?”**

*What happened was very unexpected and accidents do not happen often. We do not know what will happen in the future but there are things we can do to make things safer.*

**“But what if I had ....”**

*There is nothing that you could or could not have done that would have made a difference. It's hard because everyone wishes things were different.*

**“Will my sad feelings go away?”**

*It's normal to feel really sad when you think about [name of the person who has died]. Sadness sometimes comes in waves where it is really big and other times not so big. It's important to share these feelings with people who care about you. Over time, these feelings will change, and you will notice that you don't always feel so sad.*

**“Will I ever feel happy again?”**

*Yes, you will feel happy again. It might be hard to imagine right now, but as time goes on, you will start to feel happy moments again. It's okay to feel sad for a while, but remember that happiness will gradually come back into your life, and you will be able to enjoy things again. You will laugh and have fun again.*

**“Why do I feel guilty?”**

Following a death, children may often feel guilty, questioning if they could have done something to prevent the loss or remembering negative things that may have happened in their friendship. It's crucial for adults to approach these emotions with sensitivity, providing reassurance and creating a safe space for open communication.

*I'm really sorry to hear that you're feeling guilty. It's understandable to have these feelings, especially with something as difficult as the death of a child/adult. As hard as it is to understand and accept, it is important to remember that accidents happen, and it's not your fault. Sometimes bad things occur, and it's not because of something you did or didn't do. There's nothing you could have done to prevent this from happening.*

**“I can't sleep normally. I'm having nightmares. Is this normal?”**

It is normal for children and adults to have disrupted sleep and experience nightmares after a traumatic event. The disrupted sleep may last for several days or weeks. In most cases, it will get better on its own with the above emotional support.

*What you saw at the accident is difficult to see and it is normal to sleep poorly and have bad dreams right after what happened. Tell me about your dreams and what might be keeping you up. It is okay to feel sad or worried about this. Let's think about some things we can do to help you go back to sleep or feel better.*

**“I can't stop thinking about what it must have been like. The accident and then the hospital. Is that normal?”**

*This is perfectly normal; it's a lot to take in. When someone we care about is in an accident and is seriously hurt [and dies], it's really overwhelming and distressing. Any questions you may have, I will answer them as best as I can. If these thoughts stay with you for a long time, let's keep telling each other so that I know.*

**“Why is this so unfair?”**

*I can understand why you're feeling that this is incredibly unfair. It's really hard to make sense of something so sad happening, especially when it involves a friend/student/child. It's okay to be upset, angry, and confused about it. Grief can be overwhelming in situations like this.*

**“I have no questions or thoughts. Is that wrong?”**

*No, that's not wrong at all. It's completely okay not to have any questions or thoughts at the moment. Everyone thinks and feels things differently, and sometimes, our minds need time to process and absorb what we've experienced. It's okay to take some time to reflect and be present with your thoughts and emotions.*

## Sources

This document was compiled from several sources. Some sources contain further questions and answers related to more religious concepts and questions. These websites are listed here:

- [Winston's Wish - Telling a child someone has died](#)
- [Child Bereavement UK](#)
- [Childhood Bereavement Network](#)
- [General guidance and advice on working with teenagers and grief](#)