



When someone dies: Talking with children about death

Version 1.0

Updated 9/4/2020

We welcome your comments on this leaflet and the services we provide. You'll find comment boxes at reception, on the wards, in the Iona Café and in Day Therapies.

—
Keep in touch with us online for our latest news:
stcolumbashospice.org.uk

 [facebook.com/stcolumbas](https://www.facebook.com/stcolumbas)

 [@StColumbas](https://twitter.com/StColumbas)

 [@st.columbas.hospice](https://www.instagram.com/st.columbas.hospice)

→ St Columba's Hospice
15 Boswall Road
Edinburgh
EH5 3RW

T: 0131 551 1381

E: info@stcolumbashospice.org.uk

—
Copyright © 2020 St Columba's Hospice.
All rights reserved. Registered in Scotland
N° 48700. Charity N° SC003634

Design: monumentum.co.uk

stcolumbashospice.org.uk

When someone dies: Talking with children about death

If you find talking about illness, death and dying uncomfortable, as many of us do, you might also find yourself struggling for the right words to explain what is happening to your child or young person.

We're here to help you with that difficult task. We can give you the support you need to provide children and young people with information that is honest, timely and appropriate for their age and stage of development.

HOW DO I TELL MY CHILD SOMEONE HAS DIED?

You may want to protect your child from the difficult news, thinking that it would be better for them not to know about the death, but children are intuitive and can tell very quickly when others are upset. In the long term, it is usually better to be honest with your child and to explain what has happened, answering any questions they have in an age appropriate way. This helps them to understand and come to terms with the death.

HOW, WHEN AND WHERE TO TELL A CHILD THAT SOMEONE HAS DIED

It is usually better to tell children the news of the death as soon as possible. Children pick up quite quickly on peoples' moods

and nonverbal signs and will know that something is wrong. If they aren't told explicitly about the death they may use their imaginations to try to understand why the people around them are upset or why they don't see or hear from the person who died, perhaps imagining that everyone is angry with them, or that the person who died doesn't want to see them anymore or has gone away and left them behind. The longer you try to delay, waiting to find the "right time", the more likely it is that you may find reasons not to tell them. This could increase the chances that they will learn about the death through overhearing a conversation or finding out from others, potentially causing them even more distress.

If possible, news of the death is best shared by a parent or trusted caregiver. If you are the one telling children then you could consider asking another adult to be present to support you while you do this. Or if it is too difficult for you to put this into words yourself then you could ask this other trusted person to share the news while you stay in the room to comfort your child if needed.

If you are at home, try to find a neutral place to tell them (i.e. not their bedroom), and make sure you won't be disturbed. Turn the TV and/or phone off and start by saying:

"I have some very sad news to tell you." If the child is aware that the person had been unwell then you could build on this by saying something like "you know that was very unwell. Unfortunately they died last night/this morning/today."

If there is more than one child then it is usually best to try to talk to the children together - that way no one was told "first". However, there may be times when you want to set aside some time to talk to each of them individually. If you have children who are particularly sensitive, or if there are large differences in age, you may find you have better discussions with them without their sibling present. You will probably have a sense of what will work best in your situation.

It is helpful to use the words died or dead rather than euphemisms such as "passed away" or "gone to heaven" as children under twelve can be quite literal in their understanding. While phrases such as "We've lost Dad" or "Dad's no longer with us" might seem kinder, they can leave a child confused - for example, wondering where dad is, why he has left and why he doesn't just come back? When children hear that someone is "lost" they may assume that we can find them again. The words dead or died might seem very harsh but they are likely to save children from confusion about what has happened.

Young children will not yet have a full understanding of what dying /dead means and may see death as a kind of sleep, thinking that the dead person will still be able to feel, hear, eat, breathe etc. Explain that when a person dies their body has stopped working and they cannot feel, hear, speak, or breathe. You could explain that this means they will not be able to come back again. Your child may need to have information repeated a few times.

You can help very young children to understand what death is by looking outside for a bug that has died and one that is alive and talking to them about how we can tell if

something is alive or dead. Explain that all living things die - people, plants, animals - and that when we die it means our bodies stop working and we cannot talk, move, feel or breathe. Explain that we don't feel anything once our bodies stop working.

You might ask them if they have any questions - in general, if a child is asking a question, it usually means that they are ready to hear the answer. Remind the child that it is ok to ask any questions they have and that there is no such thing as a "silly question" and that you will always try to answer honestly. You don't need to go into too much detail. Offer simple, clear information which you can build on later if needed. If a child asks a question that you find difficult to answer then you can ask them what they think. This can help you understand how much they already know and understand about the situation and you could then respond to any gaps or misunderstandings they have.

We can never predict how children might react when they hear the news that someone has died. It may be that they are crying and upset, it might be that they are quiet and say nothing. Often a child might be really upset and then half an hour later they are playing like nothing has happened. This is because it is difficult for children to stay with hard emotions for any period of time. Some people call it "puddle jumping" (jumping in and out of the difficult emotions) - it's a way of protecting themselves and processing what has happened. Children rarely communicate how they are feeling verbally but will often express themselves through play. Don't be surprised to see themes of illness, death and doctor's visits. Understand that play is cathartic and helpful for children - it is how they process their world and solve

problems.

Sharing news of the death can be upsetting for you and the children, and it might not go as you had planned. The important thing to remember is that you're trying to do the best you can in difficult circumstances. Be kind and patient with yourself and with the children.

As a parent or carer, one of the most helpful things that you can do for your child is be honest and supportive. Assure them that this did not happen because of anything they have said or done and make it clear to them that they will be looked after. Reassurance can be helpful for a child at a time which can seem very scary and confusing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICE AND INCLUSION

When someone dies, children can feel like their world has come crashing down and that they have no control of anything. Giving children appropriate information and helping them make informed choices can help them to regain some sense of control and this can help them as they manage their grief. Give them some choice over decisions such as: whether to see someone after they've died, attending the funeral, or when and how to return to school. We discuss each of these in more detail below.

SEEING THE PERSON AFTER THEY HAVE DIED

It is often helpful to give children some choice about whether to view the body of the person who died. Some will not want to do this, but others may. Children need to be allowed to decide and should be given reassurance that whatever decisions

they make are OK. As adults we may want to protect children from things we think might be frightening or distressing, but children's imaginations may sometimes be more frightening than the reality and viewing the body and having clear explanations about what has happened can help some children to understand and accept the reality of the death.

If a child wishes to see the person who died it can be helpful to prepare them for what they might see or notice, using phrases such as:

- "Mum will be in a special box called a coffin" (you might show them a picture of the coffin in advance, to help prepare them)
- "Dad won't move"
- "Gran won't talk"
- "Mum might feel a bit cold to touch but it's ok to touch her, hold her hand, or give her a kiss or a hug"
- "Dad might look a little different than he did before he died"

Whether or not a child chooses to view the body, you might ask them if they want to draw a picture or choose a photo or object to put inside the coffin.

GOING TO THE FUNERAL

Every family will have its own traditions and beliefs, and these will play a role in deciding whether and how children might attend or participate in the funeral.

Going to a funeral can help children understand the finality of the death. Adults sometimes tell children that they are too young to attend but when they explain what the funeral is they will say it is "saying goodbye to the person". Children can then

be left wondering why they are not allowed to say goodbye to the person who has died – they can be left asking themselves; "Why couldn't I say goodbye to daddy?" or, "Why does everyone else get to say goodbye to mum but I don't?". This can be confusing and difficult for children, particularly if they had a significant or close relationship to the person who died. Not being allowed to attend when they might want to can impact on a child's grief at a later time. On the other hand, some children are expected to attend, regardless of their own feelings. This can be overwhelming for them.

It is more helpful to give children and young people some choice about whether or not to attend the funeral. Giving them a clear explanation of what happens at a funeral can help them to decide whether they want to be there, and help them prepare for what it might be like. Use clear, factual words and only give small pieces of information at a time, to ensure children don't feel overwhelmed. You might say something like, "When someone dies we have something called a funeral. A funeral lets us say goodbye to the person and remember them together. We also have a funeral because they don't need their body anymore and we need to do something with their body. It gets put into a special box called a coffin. In this country we either have a burial, which means the coffin goes into the ground, or a cremation, where the coffin is burned." Remember to follow this up with, "But when you die, your body stops working and this means that you can't feel anything anymore. You can't talk, move, or breathe, so they won't feel anything."

It can be helpful to explain specific details, like where the funeral will take place, what the place looks like, where the child might sit/stand, and how you would travel

to the funeral (i.e. Limousine, taxi, car). An explanation of the hearse might be helpful, using words such as: "There will be a long car that will have the coffin in the back. There may be some flowers on the coffin. Our car will follow the hearse to the funeral." You might also say something about how others could be reacting—we often prepare children for sadness but you could also mention the laughter that we might hear when some stories about the person's life are told. If there are songs, poems, or readings you might ask the child if they want to help choose these, to help them feel included.

It can be helpful to identify someone that the child knows who can take them outside if they want to leave the ceremony. This usually isn't needed but it can reassure the child to know this is available, and it can help them to cope if they know they can come in and out as they need.

WHAT IF I DON'T WANT MY CHILD TO ATTEND THE FUNERAL OR TO SEE THE PERSON AFTER THEY'VE DIED OR TO?

If you are not comfortable with the thought of your child going to the funeral or viewing the body, that is OK. Most children will understand if given a clear explanation of the reasons why they cannot attend – that funerals are painful and sad and that you don't want them to have to go through that experience when they are so young. Perhaps you can instead work with your child to think of a different way for them to say goodbye, such as going to the place the funeral took place, going somewhere the person liked and letting a balloon go, or going for dinner at a place the person enjoyed eating.

You might want to keep the readings/mu-

sic/eulogy in a special keepsake box for your child or make a scrapbook with the cards that you have received. You might also consider filming or recording the funeral so the child has a choice if they want to watch this as they get older. If for any reason your child doesn't attend the funeral, it's still possible to include them at a later stage with choices about a headstone, where to spread the ashes, or finding a special place for remembrance. Remember to do what feels OK for you and your family. Reassure children that they can be involved as much or as little as they choose.

RETURNING TO NURSERY OR SCHOOL

Depending how old your child is, they may be off school for a couple of days after the person dies, return to school for a while, then be off for the day of the funeral (if they are attending).

Children show and manage their grief in different ways – some may use school as a useful distraction from their sadness or find the familiar routine reassuring. While it is usually helpful to keep children in a familiar routine, going to school the day after someone has died can be too much for them. If possible, it is best to talk to your child to ask them what they would like to do.

Explain to them that you want to contact the school so you can let the headteacher, class teacher and/or guidance teacher know what has happened. Young people in high school might want only their guidance teacher to know. Where possible, be guided by the child's preferences. By listening to them and respecting their decisions, it will help give them some control over a situation that would otherwise make them feel powerless – this can help things to feel a bit more manageable.

When the child or young person is returning to school, speak to them about how they would like this to happen – do they want their class to be told in advance that someone has died? Do they want to tell the class themselves? Do they want to go in at the same time as everyone else (e.g. in primary school, do they want to be in line with everyone before going in), or would they find it more helpful to go in after everyone else? Are there a couple of staff members the child might want to be able to talk to if they feel upset? This might not be their class teacher or head teacher, but someone else they trust. Try to identify two people, in case one of the people was to be off sick.

When you speak to the school, check with the headteacher whether these things are possible and ask what other support might be available, such as extra time for assignments.

Keep in contact with the school after the child or young person has returned. They are in the best position to notice any changes in the child or young person's behaviour, which can give you some clues about how they are feeling and coping.

CHILDREN AND GRIEF

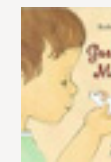
Children feel grief too: it is normal for children to go through a range of emotions in the first few weeks and months after someone dies. One minute they may be crying, upset and/or angry and the next seem like nothing has happened. Sleep patterns can become disrupted, their appetite might change, and their behaviour may become more challenging – they may be more clingy or become unsettled in school/nursery, for example. They might want to talk all the time about the person

who died, or not talk about them at all. These are all normal grief reactions for children and young people. While it can be difficult to see your child experiencing these emotions, they are just trying to make sense of what has happened and they will need some time to adjust to life without the person who died and to settle into new routines. Children will often show how they are feeling through their behaviour and/or play, as they don't always have the vocabulary or resources needed to express themselves in other ways. For most children these reactions will settle after a period of time.

Reading with children, sharing memories of the person who died, talking about their feelings, reassuring them, maintaining boundaries and keeping them in a routine will help support children as they grieve. Children and young people often learn how to cope with grief by copying the adults around them. If you feel you could benefit from some support for yourself, and/or would like to access support for your child or children, call us on **0131 551 7751** or email access@stcolumbashospice.org. uk and the Access Team will direct you to the right services. We can offer a range of bereavement information and support services for children and for adults and will meet with you to consider the most appropriate type of service for your needs just now.

If you don't feel that this is the right time for you or your family, then we hope you have found this information helpful and we want you to know that you can contact us at any time in the future.

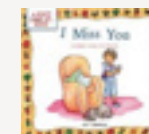
Suggested books



GOODBYE MOUSIE

by Robie Harris

Angry and upset when his pet Mousie dies, a little boy learns that it is okay to be angry. As he prepares to bury Mousie, he discovers that memories and sadness are all part of the grieving process.

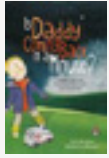


I MISS YOU: A FIRST LOOK AT DEATH

(First Look at Books)

by Pat Thomas

When a close friend or family member dies, it can be difficult for children to express their feelings. This book helps children understand that death is a natural part of life, and that grief and a sense of loss are normal feelings for them to have following a loved one's death.



IS DADDY COMING BACK IN A MINUTE?

by Elke and Alex Barber

This honest, sensitive and beautifully illustrated picture book is designed to help explain the concept of death to children aged 3+. Written in Alex's own words, it is based on the real-life conversations that Elke Barber had with her then three-year-old son, Alex, after the sudden death of his father. The book provides reassurance and understanding to readers through clear and honest answers to the difficult questions that can follow the death of a loved one, and carries the invaluable message that it is okay to be sad, but it is okay to be happy, too.



WHAT HAPPENED TO DADDY'S BODY?

by Elke and Alex Barber

This picture book aims to help children aged 3+ to understand what happens to the body after someone has died. Through telling the true story of what happened to his daddy's body, we follow Alex as he learns about cremation, burial and spreading ashes. Full of questions written in Alex's own words, and with the gentle, sensitive and honest answers of his mother, this story will reassure any young child who might be confused about death and what happens afterwards



ALWAYS AND FOREVER

by Alan Durant

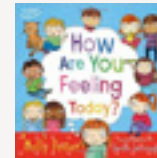
When Fox dies, Mole, Hare and Otter are devastated. They feel they will never get over their great sadness. How can life go on without him? Then one day Squirrel comes to visit. She reminds Fox's family of all the funny things he used to do. And as the friends share dinner and tell stories, they realize at last that in their hearts and memories, Fox is still with them, and he will be--always and forever.



DEAR GRANDMA BUNNY

by Dick Bruna

Miffy's Grandma died last night and Grandpa Bunny is crying. Using Miffy's experiences, this simple story can help an adult to explain to a very young child why people are sad when someone dies and what happens at a funeral. It includes a basic illustration of a coffin. Suitable for around age 2 years and upwards.



HOW ARE YOU FEELING TODAY?

by Molly Potter

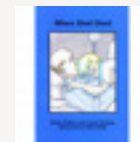
Children can choose a feeling that relates to them and then turn to the page that provides child-friendly strategies for dealing with that feeling. Helpful parent notes at the back of the book provide more ideas for parents to use with their child and other strategies to try out together and practice the skill of dealing with feelings.



BADGERS PARTING GIFTS

by Susan Varley

When Badger dies his friends think they will be sad forever. But gradually they are able to remember Badger with joy and to treasure the gifts he left behind for every one of his friends.



WHEN DAD DIED

by Sheila Hollins & Lester Sireling

Helpful for children with learning disabilities. The pictures tell the story of a father's

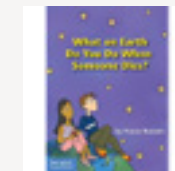
death.



WHEN MUM DIED

By Sheila Hollins & Lester Sireling

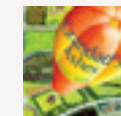
Helpful for children with learning disabilities. The pictures tell the story of a mother's death.



WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU DO WHEN SOMEONE DIES

by Trevor Romain

Answers some questions children might have about death in an easy, understandable manner (6+).



GRANDDAD'S ASHES

by Walter Smith

Tells the story of children trying to find granddad's special place to put his ashes.



THE HUGE BAG OF WORRIES

by Virginia Ironside

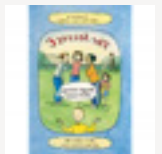
A story about dealing with worries and anxiety, to be used as a spring board into important conversations with a child.



FROG'S BREATHTAKING SPEECH

by Michael Chissick

Can teach children four yoga breathing techniques in a fun and interactive way. The story successfully increases children's awareness of their breath and shows how breathing can be used to deal with anger, anxiety and tension. Suitable for children aged 4-11. Will help to learn children about coping with difficult emotions and stressful situations.



THE SECRET C

Book by Julia Stokes

Straight talking about Cancer.



THE INVISIBLE STRING

by Patrice Karst

A story that teaches children of the tie that really binds. Mums/dads/family members feel the tug whenever kids give it; and kids feel the tug that comes right back: the Invisible String reaches from heart to heart. Does everybody have an Invisible String? How far does it reach anyway? Whether it's a loved one far away or a parent in the next room this delightful book illustrates a new way to cope with something all children and parents confront sooner or later; a child's fear of loneliness and separation. Here is a warm and delightful lesson teaching young and old that we aren't ever really alone.



WATER BUGS AND DRAGONFLIES

Book by Doris Stickney

—
St. Columba's Hospice Care
Last updated 9/4/2020