



WHAT DO I TELL THE CHILDREN?

What should I tell my children about Granny dying? Most parents hesitate to talk about death, particularly with their young children. Yet it is an inescapable part of life that we must all deal with. If we are to help our children understand death, we must let them know that it is all right to talk about it.

It is a difficult subject to approach, but talking to our children will enable us to discover what they know and do not know. We can help them by providing much-needed understanding about their misconceptions, fears or worries. Without this communication, we can become limited in our ability to help and comfort them. What we say to children and when we say it will depend on their ages and experience, it will also depend on our own life experiences. Each situation we face is different.

Children become aware of death long before we realize it. They hear about it in fairy tales, act it out in their play and it is seen at least once a day on television. If you permit children to openly discuss it, you can give them information, prepare them and help when they get upset. Encouragement can be given by showing respect for what they say, but this is not easy and many of us feel very uncomfortable with it. This is especially true if we do not have all the answers. While our answers to their questions might not be comforting, it is important to share what you truly believe. Be honest if you have doubts; saying you don't know may be more comforting than giving an explanation that you don't believe. Children are very attuned to us and can sense out doubts, so white lies, no matter how well intended, can create uneasiness and distrust.

As children grow, their understanding of death changes. Pre-school children usually see death as temporary and impersonal – a notion that is reinforced by watching cartoon characters miraculously rise up again after being crushed or blown apart. Between the ages of five and nine, most children are beginning to realise the finality of death, and that all living things must die; but they still do not see it as personal, believing instead that through their own ingenuity and efforts, they can escape. At this stage, they also tend to personify death and give it a tangible form, such as a skeleton (for me, it was walking shop mannequins from the local department store), and have nightmares about them.

It is essential to remember that children develop at different rates and have their own personal way of expressing and handling feelings. Some may ask questions at a very early age, while others might appear unconcerned about the death of Granny, yet react strongly to the death of a pet. Some may never mention death, but will act it out in their play. No matter

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how children cope or express their feelings, they need sympathetic and non-judgemental responses from adults. As always, careful listening and watching are important ways to learn how to respond to your child's needs.

Talking to your children about death is always challenging. Long and complicated responses might confuse them; they need brief and simple explanations. Children also learn through repetition, wanting the same question answered over and over again. Take opportunities to talk to children about dead flowers, insects and animals (especially beloved pets), making death a natural part of life. It will also take a child time to understand fully the practical and emotional implications of death. It is easiest to talk about death when we are less emotionally involved, so it is best to broach the subject early on and not wait for the emotional flood when there is a death in the family, when you might not be up to dealing with questions from your children.

When a family death happens, remember that children also need to mourn. Mourning is the recognition of a deeply felt loss and a process that all of us have to go through before we can go on living fully and normally again. Mourning heals. A young child may show little immediate grief and may seem unaffected by the loss, but they may express their sadness on and off over a longer period of time. They might inadvertently upset other family members by opening painful wounds with unexpected and repetitive questions. It might sound heartless, but it would not be too strange for a child to hear about the death of a family member and be more worried about what they are having for dinner, or who is going to pick them up from school. As long as they know that their routine is going to continue unchanged, they can cope. The best you can do is to give your children patience, understanding and support to complete their own "grief work".

If you need to talk to someone about bereavement or need more information, you can contact Cruise Bereavement Care. This charity exists to promote the wellbeing of bereaved people and to enable anyone bereaved to understand their grief and cope with their loss. They can be contacted by phone on **0844 477 9400**, or through their website on **www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk**