Talking to Kids About Death

A one-page guide to explaining a death to children and teens: honest words by age, phrases to avoid, funerals, and where kids can get support.

Letter page · For parents, caregivers, grieving families, teachers

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Tell children soon, so they hear it from someone they trust, in short and simple words. Avoid phrases like "passed away" or "went to sleep," which can confuse them (Dougy Center).

Under 5

- Share four simple ideas: the person isn't coming back; they aren't hurting; everything that lives dies someday; it's not your fault.
- Skip "gone to sleep" or "gone on a long trip." They can make children afraid of sleep or travel.

Ages 5 to 12

- Most children understand that death is permanent by about ages 5-7, but may struggle to accept it.
- Answer questions honestly, again and again. Explain the cause simply, so they don't blame themselves.

Teens

- Many resist talking about it. Some pull away; some take risks such as drinking. Be patient, and show healthy ways to cope.

Words to skip, at any age

"At least..." · "Be strong" · "I know just how you feel" · "You'll feel better soon"

Funerals

Invite children, explain what they'll see and hear, and make every part optional. Ask a trusted adult who isn't grieving as deeply to stay with them.

> ⓘ **Need to talk to someone now?**
>
> Call or text **988** to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, free, confidential and open 24/7 (US). In an emergency, call **911**.

What you can do today: listen more than you talk. Children's grief groups and camps, often free, can help too. Read how to talk to children about death, by age.

Sources

1. How Children Understand Death: What to Say When a Loved One Dies, American Academy of Pediatrics (HealthyChildren.org). https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-Children-Understand-Death-What-You-Should-Say.aspx
2. Ten Tips for Supporting Children Who Are Grieving, Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children & Families. https://www.dougy.org/assets/uploads/Dougy-Center-Tips-for-Supporting-Grieving-Children2.0.pdf
3. 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (SAMHSA-funded). https://988lifeline.org/

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