

Talking to Children about Death and Dying

Talking about death and dying with children can be very hard. This handout will give you some tips that can guide you through these difficult conversations.

Key points:

- Set aside time and find a quiet place to talk. Talking to children about death and dying will likely be several conversations over time. Too much information at once can be overwhelming.
- Try to be open and honest. Use the words “death” and “dying”. Words like “passed away” or “we lost him” can confuse children.
- Your child’s questions can help you to know what information to share. Answer in a simple and concrete way.
- You know your child best, share what you believe is most important.
- Be comfortable in saying “I don’t know”, “we don’t know right now” or “I will tell you when I know”.
- Look out of your child’s reaction, and ask them about it. Name feelings (for example: sad, angry, worried) and let them know you understand. Let them know you are always willing to talk.

How do I start the conversation?

Try to keep your child informed. Children can often sense when they are not being told the whole truth. As a result, children may worry and make up false ideas about what is happening. The amount of information you provide can depend on your child’s age and development, or what they already know about death from school, the media or others.

Let your child know all or some of the following:

- The name and seriousness of the illness
- The parts of your body that are affected
- How your illness was discovered
- What will be done to treat your illness, what has not worked, and what is being done now to treat symptoms.
- What changes they might see in your appearance or the way you feel. For example, hair loss or feeling tired.
- Any important updates throughout treatment.

Remember to explain that:

- Cancer is not contagious. Others cannot ‘catch’ cancer, like a cold or flu.
- Cancer is not their fault. Nothing they did caused your illness.
- We don’t always know why illnesses develop.

What can I do to help a child during this difficult time?

- Provide information about what to expect. Explaining what to expect can ease your child’s fear of the unknown. Let them know about the changes that will affect their normal routine, and also what will stay the same.
- Share information with your child’s school officials. They can provide support and look out for any changes at school.

- Set up a regular “check-in time”, when you share with each other how you are both feeling. Your child may not know how to react right away or may not want to talk about it. Give them time and show them you are there when they are ready.

How can I help a child visit their dying loved one?

- Before visiting a hospital or hospice, describe what it will be like. For example, explain what they will see and any rules.
- Give your child something they can do to help care for their loved one. For example, decorating their room, displaying their artwork or choosing music to play.
- Talk to your child after the visit and find out how it was for them. Encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings. If it was too overwhelming, try shortening the length of visits for a while.
- Adults often think children should not visit someone who is dying. However, the reality is that children are involved in grieving. Their fears can worsen if they are not allowed to be present and involved. When death is viewed as a natural part of life, children can make better sense of their experience in a healthy way.

How do children grieve and how can I help?

- **Children grieve in chunks.** They may seem sad one minute and then happy the next. Their play will often show this. It is natural for children to use play to make sense of their emotions.
- **Grieve together.** Children take cues and learn how to grieve from those around them. Adults often try to hide their grief to protect children from difficult emotions. However, children need to know that all feelings are okay. Sometimes you will cry together or be sad together. Other times you may feel different emotions and that is okay. Grief can bring about many emotions. Encourage your children to be open with their feelings.

What are a child’s common concerns?

- **What will happen to my dying loved one?** Explain what will happen to the person’s body and soul after they die. Explain what will happen to them physically in plain language. You can say that they will not hurt anymore because the body has no feelings after death. As for the spirit, ask the child what he or she believes, describe what you believe, and talk about ideas that others have.
- **What will happen to us?** Your child may worry about what will happen to them if they lose a parent. Let them know what the plan will be. For example, you can explain who will take care of them.
- **I don’t want to lose him/her.** Reassure the child that their loved one will still be their father/mother/grandparent/sibling. Death does not end that relationship. Talk about ways to keep precious memories alive and honour their loved one. For example, doing things like celebrating their birthday, continuing to practice something their loved one taught them, or making a memory book.

Other Resources

A **social worker** can offer you guidance and support. Make an appointment with a social worker at the Cancer Centre or hospital by asking a member of your cancer care team for a referral.

The **Patient and Family Resource Centre**, located on Burr 0 at the Cancer Centre, has books for adults and children on coping with death. There are also some useful Internet resources, including:

- www.virtualhospice.ca – search: Talking with Children and Youth about Serious Illness.
- www.cancer.net – click on coping– Grief and Bereavement– Helping Grieving Children and Teenagers.
- www.cancer.org - Search: Helping children when a family member has cancer.