

## Learning About Death

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“For children, even those quite healthy and never before seriously sick, death has a powerful and continuing meaning...Eventually the questions always come...” From Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*

GOALS: You want your young child to:

- Feel comfortable talking to you about death and other difficult topics.
- Experience and express their feelings.
- Develop (over time) more understanding of death and a healthy attitude about it.
- Learn more about your family’s customs and beliefs related to death.

Things to remember:

- Talk about death before it happens to someone in your child’s life. Reading children’s books related to death are a good way to bring up the topic.
- You will talk about this many times, maybe adding bits of information as your child grows.
- Listen to children’s questions about death, and answer only the question they’re asking at the moment. Keep answers simple and concrete.
- Avoid euphemisms for death, especially anything that relates death to sleeping or leaving. Just say “dead”. Religious explanations can be confusing too. “In heaven” sounds like the person is still alive but just in a different place.
- Avoid linking getting sick or going to the hospital to dying. If someone is sick before they die, explain the difference between a little sick and too sick to stay alive.
- Young children need explanations in terms of body functions and actions—dead people can’t think, move, breathe, eat, or go to the bathroom, their hearts and brains don’t work, etc.
- Try to stay as calm and matter-of-fact as possible.
- As children get older, they may worry about their parents dying. Tell them they’ll always be taken care of and who will do the caring. You can show them how to contact those people.

When a death occurs:

- Again, try to stay as calm as possible when explaining what’s happened.
- It’s OK for your child to cry and for your child to see you crying. Reassure your child that grownups can take care of themselves and children even when they’re sad.

- If you, the parents, are deeply grieving, it is helpful to find another adult your child trusts to help explain things and take care of your child when you aren't able.
- Children will react to what they see around them rather than to the actual death. If they're going to calling hours or a funeral, they need to know ahead of time that they'll see people crying, that they may see the dead person in a box not looking the same as before, what the order of events will be and who will be taking care of them.
- Going to calling hours or a funeral is much like other adult oriented outings for your child. Pack a bag with treats and things your child like to do.

Avoid forcing children to discuss death or participate in any rituals related to it. The goal is for children to become comfortable over time.