



CHILDREN AGED 7-9

PARENTING AFTER  
IMMEDIATE LOSS



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### HOW TO SPEAK WITH MY CHILD AFTER THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

You may wonder what's the right time to talk to your child about their loved one's death. Truthfully, there may not be a perfect time. However, the sooner you communicate, the more time they'll have to process the news and start the important task of mourning.

#### 1. CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Find a quiet place where you can talk without distractions or interruptions. Include another adult if your child (or you) may be comforted by their presence.

#### 2. BE PROMPT, HONEST, AND STRAIGHT FORWARD

When approaching your child about the loss, use care and be direct: "I need to tell you something important that's going to be hard to talk about. Daddy died today." Pause to give your child a moment to take in your words. Be sure to provide accurate, age-appropriate information. If you have several children of different ages, start with the language appropriate to the youngest. Use the right words, such as 'cancer', 'die', 'death', rather than something you think will be easier or sound nicer, like: 'not well', 'go away', or 'pass on'. These vague messages easily confuse kids and they may not fully understand what you're trying to say. They may also jump to inaccurate conclusions like anyone who is sick will die or that the person is leaving temporarily.

#### 3. WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

Your child may still need you to explain what 'death' means in simple terms. You may not have all the answers and that's alright. The important thing is to establish and open the lines of communication. Encourage kids to say what they're thinking and feeling in the days, weeks, and months following the loss. Talk about your own feelings: It helps kids become aware of and feel comfortable with theirs. Say things like, "I know you're feeling very sad. I'm sad, too. We both loved Daddy so much, and he loved us, too." If you do have to explain death, talk in terms of the body not working anymore. You might say, "Dead means the person's body stops working and they can't do things like walk or talk anymore. When someone is dead, it can't be fixed, and they can't come back." Show that you are available to answer questions along the way and be upfront about what you or the loved one are still unsure of at this stage.

By including your child in these conversations, you are showing him or her that your family will go through this together.



#### 4. COMFORT AND KEEP YOUR CHILD CLOSE

Children react differently to learning that a loved one has died. Some may cry, some will ask questions, and others will seem to not react at all. That is okay; there's no wrong way to react. Throughout the conversation, reinforce that they are safe, and you are safe. Stay close to your child and offer hugs or cuddles while you speak with them about this difficult topic. Comfort them by highlighting that they will continue to be cared for and loved no matter what.

#### 5. THEY ARE NOT TO BLAME

While this may be obvious to you, kids tend to believe they cause things to happen by what they do or say. Children may focus heavily on what the death means to them (ie, "is it my fault?" or "who will read me stories?"). Reassure them by emphasizing that what's happening to their loved one isn't happening because of anything they did or said. Reassure them by addressing their concerns that they will continue to be loved and cared for, and what's happening to their loved one isn't happening because of anything they did or said.

#### 6. WHAT'S NEXT?

Let your child know what will happen next. The death of their loved one will likely mean your child must cope with changes in their routine. Be clear about any new arrangements that have been made so they can adjust in anticipation of those changes. For example, "Aunt Beth will pick you up from school like Mum used to".

#### 7. FUNERALS AND MEMORIALS

It's important to include your child in mourning rituals such as viewings, funerals, or memorial services. Explain ahead of time what will happen at these ceremonies. For example, "Lots of people who loved Daddy will be there. We will sing, pray, and talk about Daddy's life. People will cry and hug each other. Some people will come up to us and say things like, "I'm sorry for your loss". We can say, "Thank you" back to be polite. You can stay next to me and hold my hand if you want." You can highlight that people will be sharing memories of Daddy to celebrate his life, which helps people feel better.

Offer your child a role in the ceremony. Even a small role can help kids master the emotional situation and instill a memory of being a part of the collective grieving experience. Of course, allow your child to decide whether or not they would like to take part.



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