

Children and teenagers 11 years and over

Children from about 11 years and over need to be treated as adults and, like adults, they will have difficulty in understanding and handling their emotions. Many teenagers bottle their feelings up inside and may appear to be cutting themselves off from the family.

As well as not being afraid to cry in front of them it will help if parents talk openly about the life and death of the deceased. Sharing our grief will help them to share theirs.

It is a good idea to talk around the dinner table, without the distraction of television, but not forcing them to contribute the conversation.

It may help to draw out their grief by asking them for suggestions on things like "When should we arrange this?" or "What do you think about...?" This approach can be especially helpful in the case of teenagers preparing for a loved one to die, perhaps a grandmother who is terminally ill.

If they don't want to contribute, don't worry about it or force them to answer. Even if they don't know the answer they will still know you care and will still feel involved.

If they can't express themselves, try asking them to give you a big hug so you don't feel so lonely. Asking for their help with hugs and kisses, or even just holding hands can help everyone to express their grief and start to feel better.

Teenagers may need someone outside of the family to talk to, so it is a good idea to let the school know someone close to them has died. It may also help to let a sports coach or other group leader know of the death if the teenagers are involved in different activities.

Appropriate literature, not specially given to them but just left lying around the house, can also be valuable.

Some films or videos will also help, advice on these and any printed material can be sought from any qualified and experienced bereavement counsellor or educator. Above all, we must talk with the teenagers and show them our support.

How can we help children with their grieving?

Just being there and sharing the grieving with them is probably the most helpful thing we can do. Like adults, children need to express their feelings, and they need to share the experience with the rest of the family - not feel they are being left out of an important family occasion.

Children of all ages need to be involved, and should be encouraged (though not forced) to attend the viewing of the deceased and to take part in the funeral. Both of these events should be explained in simple terms so the children know what to expect.

Giving young people a special job to do like carrying a flower or a candle, or writing a letter or poem to place in the coffin, will give them a feeling of really belonging. It will also help them to understand the finality of death.

Many people believe that death is only the beginning of a new life for the deceased. If religious beliefs can be explained in simple terms to the children, this may help them in their grief, but don't be surprised if the children are angry at God for the death of the person.

And if we are so overwhelmed by our own grief, we don't feel we have the capacity to help our children with theirs, this is when a close relative or friend should be enlisted to help, so the children don't feel abandoned by their grieving parents.

Children should be encouraged to read suitable books which may help them to understand how they feel. Refer to large book shops, Church book stores etc.

Australian Funeral Directors Association

When faced with having to make funeral arrangements, most people have no prior experience in organising such an event, and little knowledge of what to do.

Funeral directors can alleviate this burden for you by providing a range of services, allowing you to choose an appropriate funeral that will be conducted professionally, and with dignity.

For your own peace of mind, select a funeral director who is an accredited member of the Australian Funeral Directors Association which requires its members to honour a strict code of ethics and practice.

The AFDA publishes a range of information brochures for the bereaved. These brochures along with other help and advice is available through AFDA offices:

National Office: Telephone (03) 9859 9966

Or your nearest AFDA member.

A Gentle Touch Funerals
73 Railway Street
Mudgeeraba QLD 4213
Ph: 07 5522 0099

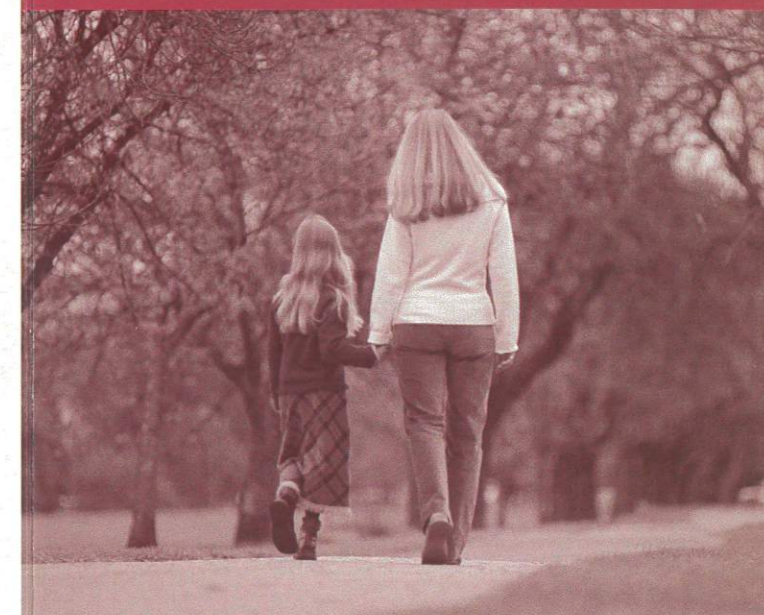


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What do we tell the children?

A simple guide for adults to help children understand death



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What do we tell the children?

One of the most difficult situations adults have to face is telling children that someone they love has died. We worry that they won't understand, or that they will be emotionally devastated, and we automatically want to protect them from hurt.

In fact children handle death very well - often much better than adults do - and in reality, they may be more hurt, more frightened and more resentful if we exclude them from our pain or try to cover it up.

Children need to grieve the death of a loved one too. They also need to be included in the family's grief so they don't feel rejected and left out of a family occasion.

They must be told as soon as possible that a person they care about has died, preferably by a parent or someone very close. They need to be told the truth, not half-truths or fairy stories which will only confuse them and may have adverse emotional effects later in life.

Many people find comfort in religious beliefs and these may help the children if they are already living in a religious atmosphere within the family.

What and how we tell the children depends entirely on their age and the level of their understanding.

Small children up to about 6 years old

Very young children have no real concept of the finality of death. They see cartoon films in which their favourite characters are blown to pieces, crushed, run over or fall off a cliff and then two seconds later, the same characters re-surface alive and well for some more adventure.

But when it is personal, small children do feel loss and grief and they can still understand sadness. They need to know that it's alright to feel sad. They may need lots of hugs and kisses and reassurances that everyone else is still there and that it wasn't their fault the person died.

We need to be very gentle and always honest in answering any questions they may have like:

“What does dead mean”

Dead means that the life has gone and the body that is left can no longer do all the normal things like walking and talking, eating and sleeping, laughing and crying. The body can no longer think or feel, and in the case of someone who died after a painful illness, there is no more pain.

“Why do we die”

The simplest explanation is that all living things on this earth die - it is a part of the life cycle. It can be compared to flowers in the garden - they start off as a bud, they grow and blossom into a flower, then the petals fall off and the flower dies when its time for living is over.

Animals also make good comparison particularly if the child has a pet which has died. It makes us sad when an animal dies and it's okay to feel sad.

It's the same with people. We are born as babies, we grow up into children and adults, then we grow old and die when our time for living is over. It is a normal part of life and it is alright to feel sad about someone dying.

It may help to explain that, although most people don't die until they are quite old, sometimes younger grown-ups and even children might have an accident or illness and die. Even though the doctors and nurses try their very best, they are not always able to make them well again.

It is wise to simply and honestly answer children's questions as they ask them and not to go into long explanations. Don't be surprised if small children keep coming back and asking the same questions over and over again. Repetition is essential to help them understand.

Young children around 6-10 years old

Children in this age group react to death in many of the same ways as adults do. They feel shock and anger, they may deny the death has occurred, they blame other people for the death or feel guilty for not “being good” to the person who died.

One of the major problems for them is that they don't understand their own moods, and may regress to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting. They may become aggressive with play-mates, destroy their toys or throw tantrums.

Children's grief can manifest itself in many different ways, so it is a good idea to let them see that we are grieving too and share our tears with them. Let them know they don't “have to be brave” and it's okay to talk about someone who has died.

Children this age can be very curious about the physical aspects of death and funerals and their questions should be answered truthfully so that the fear of the unknown is eliminated.

They should be told gently what to expect at the viewing and funeral and encouraged to attend.

“What is the difference between cremation and burial?”

Out of respect for the real person who was once alive, the body “house” is gently placed in a coffin and either buried or cremated.

With burial the coffin is lowered into the ground and covered, the body “house” gradually wears away until all that is left is bones in the ground.

With cremation, the coffin is carefully burned in a special kiln until all that is left are small pieces of bones which are then placed in a container. This can be kept by the family or disposed of according to the wishes of the deceased and their family.

Whatever the questions children ask, honesty and simplicity are the keys to helping them with their grief. It is a good idea to ask them if what you have told them answered their question and whether they would like to know any more. Reassure them that they can always come back later and ask any questions.

And if you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say so. Parents are human too and don't always have the answers.