

HOW TO

TO TELL A CHILD SOMEONE DIED

For many, it can be an incredible burden to be the one to tell a child that someone important to them has died. Most adults struggle with talking about death, so when it comes time to talk about death with a child we can often feel helpless. What should I say? What is appropriate and inappropriate? Even though it is hard to share bad news, there are simple ways to start the conversation.

Telling a child someone has died starts with a commitment to honesty. Honesty is important. In order to be honest, enter the conversation without expectations about how they will react to the news. Some kids may respond with fear, while others may seem indifferent. There are no “right and wrong,” or “good and bad” reactions.

How you tell a child that someone died depends on context, nature of the relationship, and timing. For example, if a teacher or student died over the weekend, it will be helpful to have a conversation about the death in advance of school on Monday. News of this nature spreads incredibly quickly, and it is important that the child knows the truth before classmates and others in the community begin sharing their own story and interpretation of the death.

It is important to remember that there will be aspects of this that you can and cannot control in these situations. You can play an important role in how children hear about and come to understand the death. We can best support our children by having an open dialogue that helps build understanding and an opportunity to express themselves.

BELOW IS A SCRIPT YOU MIGHT TRY IF A TEACHER OR ADULT IN THEIR LIFE DIES:

1. Adult: So, Alexis, have you heard about what happened with Mrs. Scott?

Don't assume Alexis doesn't already know. She may have picked it up already from a friend on social media etc.

2. Adult: I just learned that Mrs. Scott died.

WAIT to see how the child responds.

3. Adult: I think a lot of your friends and teachers will be talking about it this week in school. I would like us to talk about it too.

Allow yourself to be spontaneous with the conversation. Here are some things you should know about typical reactions:

- Each child responds differently.
- Children may have an increased sense of fear for their safety and yours.
- Children may be afraid to return to school.

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- Children process information in fragments. They may take it in and then quickly move onto something else
- Children may just want to be with their friends
- Children usually have lots of questions. It will be important to answer them at an age-appropriate level.

4. Adult: This is really [insert emotion such as sad, disappointing, etc.].

Wait to see if the child has ideas of her own.

5. Adult: Assure the child that they can talk openly about the death and their feelings with you. Identify other people they can also talk with at school or in their life. Communicate your love and allow them to explore their reactions. Often, reassurance and love are the most meaningful things we can do for our children.

HERE ARE THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN TELLING A CHILD THAT A PARENT, SIBLING, OR LOVED ONE DIED:

- **HONESTY** – Kids need to know the truth. Don't lie or distort the facts. However, you don't have to provide all the facts at once. Start with a few facts and give more as they ask for them so you don't overwhelm with information.
- **SAFETY** – Kids need to know that their needs are going to be met and that you will be there for them.
- **DON'T MAKE FALSE PROMISES** – You can't promise that you will not die. Instead, ensure their safety.
- **PREPARATION** – Don't arrive at a funeral without telling a child what they'll see and what to expect. Similarly, prepare a child for what they might see, feel, or hear in the coming days.
- **INCLUSION** – Do not exclude children. Empower them to make decisions about their participation in rituals and give opportunities for them to feel like they can contribute.
- **GIVE SPACE** – A child may need to go outside and play, be by herself, or go be with friends.
- **NO EXPECTATIONS** – A child may seem indifferent or provide another surprising response. That's okay. It's just how some kids digest difficult information, especially if they don't understand the finality or enormity of what has happened.

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- **STAY AWAY FROM CLICHÉS AND ABSTRACT IDEAS** – While there is, of course, a place for religion in this process, employing it here is not the place for it. Religious ideas are often abstract and confusing to a child and don't ultimately help them understand what "death" means. If you say, "Mommy has gone to heaven" a child will likely be confused and wonder when she will come back, how to get to heaven to see Mommy, or think God is selfish for taking mommy away.

This can be a very overwhelming time. It's not about getting it perfect, but being informed and staying consistently with honesty. There is time to clarify and try again if the first time didn't go as you had hoped. There are many conversations ahead...

See our [tip sheet](#) on talking about death with children.