



# SAFE PASSAGE

*Talking to Children About Death*



Kansas City  
Hospice

# Contents

**I.** A Child's Understanding of Death

**II.** Talking to Children About Death

**III.** Preparing a Child for a Funeral

**IV.** Books for Children



**Kansas City Hospice**

*[www.kansascityhospice.org](http://www.kansascityhospice.org)*

# A Child's Understanding of Death

Helping a child deal with death and dying can be very challenging. Children have neither the life experience nor the intellectual or emotional development needed to understand death as adults do. However, as a member of the family, each child should be included, at an appropriate level, in the discussions and activities surrounding the death of a loved one.


Children's emotional and intellectual development affects their comprehension of death. But all children can understand death at some level and it is important for them to know what is happening. How can we help them understand? The most important thing is to give information to them and then listen to their responses.

Explaining how we feel when someone we love dies also is helpful. Tell the child that it is very normal to be very sad when we hear the news about a death, and explain that the adults around them may be upset and crying. This also is a good time to talk about the family's beliefs concerning afterlife.

**THREE- TO FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN** do not understand the concept of forever. They will see death as temporary, reversible or a restricted form of existence. Still, the separation caused by death is particularly frightening for children this age. They need reassurance that their emotions are normal and okay. “Magical thinking” is common at this age, and children believe their thoughts or actions are somehow connected to illness or death.

**BY AGES SIX TO NINE**, children begin to understand that death is final, but they think it happens only to other people. Some may be very curious about death and want details about physical changes that occur. They may think death is a scary creature or person who takes people away. Or they might fear that death is contagious. Some may continue to believe that their thoughts cause events. They worry about their caregivers’ vulnerability and want reassurance of their own security if those who care for them become sick.

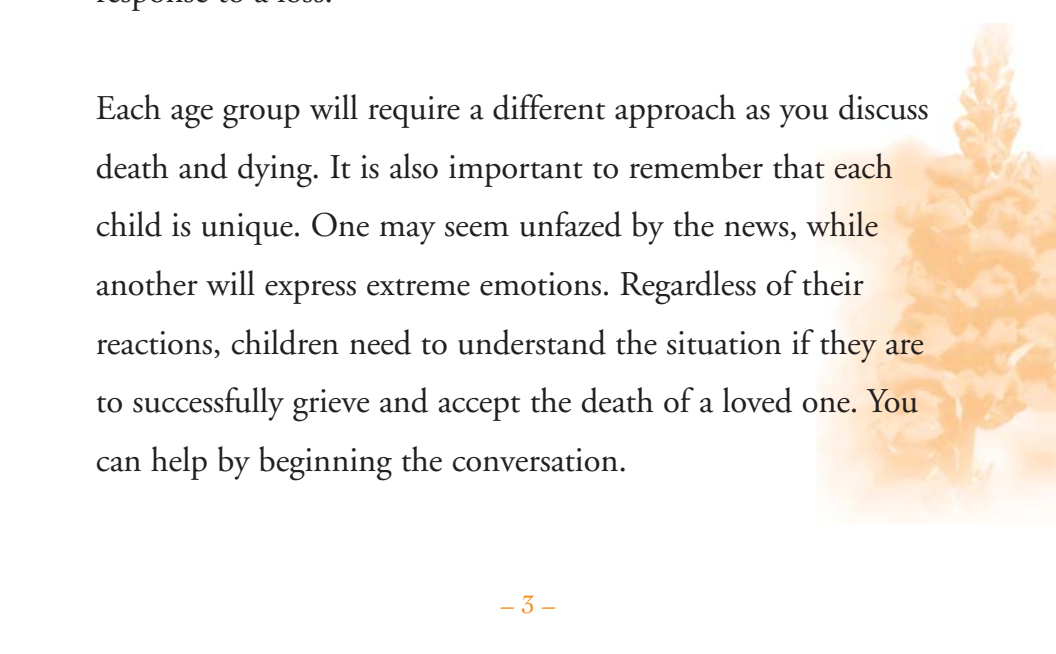
**BETWEEN AGES NINE AND TWELVE**, many children may have experienced the death of a relative or, more often, the loss of a pet. They know death is final and comes to all plants and animals. They may be extremely interested in the physical process of dying, but still they see death as distant from



themselves. It is common for children this age to worry about the effects the loss will have on their immediate future. They also may fear that the loss will set them apart as being different from their friends and school peers.

**ADOLESCENTS** are forging their own identities. Most do so by pushing their parents away. Such distancing from family is part of normal separation. The death of a parent at this age can cause confusion and guilt. Death is fascinating, frightening and particularly threatening for adolescents. They don't like anything that makes them feel different from their peers. Losses may make teens feel more child-like and dependent. On the other hand, teenagers may feel they are required to step into an adult role in response to a loss.

Each age group will require a different approach as you discuss death and dying. It is also important to remember that each child is unique. One may seem unfazed by the news, while another will express extreme emotions. Regardless of their reactions, children need to understand the situation if they are to successfully grieve and accept the death of a loved one. You can help by beginning the conversation.



Keep in mind that younger children don't have the attention span for in-depth conversations. Don't be disappointed if, after working up the courage to broach the subject, you are rebuffed by a pre-schooler who wants to know what's for dinner a minute after you've begun your conversation. Older children may not have much to say either. Often, they need time alone to digest the news. Be assured the children will come back later with questions or thoughts.

## *Talking to Children About Death*

### **Beginning a conversation**

Find a time that will be free from interruptions. Depending on the child's attention span, your conversation may be brief but it should not be interrupted.

Explain the importance of what you want to say. An example:  
*"I want to talk with you about something very important."*

Be truthful and do not give half-truths or other stories. Telling "white lies" only confuses a child.

Ask the child what she thinks will happen to her loved one. You can explain the illness, its possible progression and the possibility that the child's loved one may die soon. Give enough information for the child to understand the severity of the illness.

Ask the child what he wants to do for his loved one. Ask if he would like to tell his loved one anything. Children often have incredible ideas that can make this time very special.

## Addressing children's fears

Young children who have experienced the death of a loved one often worry that they too will get sick and die. Youngsters of all ages also worry about what will happen to them during the illness and after the death of their loved one. Assure them you will be there for them. Children need the security of knowing an adult will care for them. Assure them they won't be left completely alone.

Emphasize that their loved one's illness is not their fault. Use clear, direct explanations of what happened so younger children won't assume their actions or thoughts caused the loved one's

illness or death. Clear explanations also reduce the potential for guilt if a younger child tried to prevent the death by playing a certain way or having certain thoughts. Let the children know how they can be most helpful during the illness. For example, by spending time with their loved one or sending notes, homemade pictures or other expressions of love.

## When a child asks questions

This is an excellent time to teach a child what it means to physically die. Explain that the heart stops, that the person stops breathing and that he or she can no longer talk or feel. Do not describe death as being like sleep.

The child probably will have questions. Answer only what the child is asking. Do not belittle the questions. They are important to the child. Be sure the child knows he or she is not at fault about the death. Listen closely to the child. Make sure there is an adult available to answer the child's questions at any time.

Answer as best you can when children ask "why?" No one has all the answers, and an "I don't know" might be the best and most honest response. Many adults find that explaining their

religious beliefs is helpful. A local minister, priest, rabbi or imam could help.

## Including children during illness

Let them visit, even help you care for their loved one. Adults rob their children of the chance to feel included or to say good-bye when they exclude youngsters from the care of a dying loved one. Including children also helps prevent unnecessary fears about future, similar experiences. Children's understanding and healthy acceptance of a loved one's death grows from seeing, doing and participating in the care of that person.

## For a sudden or unexpected death

Because there is no time to prepare or say good-bye, a child may have more difficulty with a sudden or unexpected death. Their questions and feelings will begin when you give them the bad news. Use basic information as you explain what has happened; it is not necessary to include every detail to give them an accurate picture.

Let the children know their feelings are okay and normal. Include them in the visitation and funeral if they are comfortable with attending. Reassure them they will be cared for and let

them know that any questions or concerns they have are important to the adults around them.

If they did not have the chance before the death to tell the person who died that they loved them, encourage the children to write a letter to the person saying all they wanted to say. The letter may be left in the casket or on the grave. It is helpful for each of us, including children, to express our thoughts and feelings, and it is not too late to do that during or after the funeral.

Children may need additional support in the case of a sudden loss. If so, seek that help as soon as possible.

## *Preparing a Child for a Funeral*

Give children a detailed explanation of what happens before and during a funeral. Deciding whether a child will attend a funeral will depend on age, the individual family and the child's desires. Be sensitive to the child's reaction to discussing the funeral; there may be fear, even panic, in anticipating the event. Some families may choose to allow the child to decide whether to attend. If the

child does not attend, plan carefully who will be with the child during the funeral. Later, discuss the funeral with him or her. It will be important to bring the child back into the family circle after the funeral.

Describe where the body is and what is happening to it.

For example: “\_\_\_\_\_’s body has been taken to the funeral home. He/she will be dressed in clothes the family has chosen and will be put in a casket. A casket, which is also called a coffin, is the special box that holds the body. He/she will be in the casket at the funeral and will be buried in the casket.”

Describe what will occur at the funeral.

For example: “People will come to the funeral home to visit and attend a service that usually includes music and prayers. Sometimes people share memories during the service about the person who died.”

If the child has never been to a funeral home, describe the rooms in detail. If the casket will be open, talk about what the body will look and feel like. For example: “\_\_\_\_\_’s body will be lying down in the casket. Sometimes the bottom

half of the casket, where the person's legs are, is closed. But the legs and feet are still there. He/she will not be moving or doing any of the things he/she used to do because being dead means your body doesn't work any more. \_\_\_\_\_ can't see, hear, talk or feel any more. \_\_\_\_\_ will look a lot like he/she always did. If you touch him/her, he/she will feel different. The body will feel cool instead of warm and will feel harder than a live body." If the person's appearance will be significantly different due to an illness or injury, be sure to include that information.

Describe how people will behave at the funeral. Some may be very quiet, some may be crying and some may even be laughing if they are sharing memories about funny stories.

Talk about the burial or cremation. "When the funeral is over, the casket will be taken to the cemetery and buried. Many of the people who were at the funeral home will go to the cemetery for the burial." Or, "After the funeral, \_\_\_\_\_'s body will be taken to a place called a crematory where it will be turned to ashes."

After any of these basic explanations, ask if the child has questions. Answer the questions calmly and accurately.

Before the funeral or visitation, arrange for an adult – someone who is not emotionally involved with the death – to be available to take charge of the child if he or she decides not to attend at the last minute. The child may have more questions or may need to take a break. Some children cannot last through an entire visitation or funeral service and need to move to a more neutral activity.

If young children are attending a service, pack some quiet activities for them in case they become fidgety or need a break. Some funeral homes provide this.

## *Books for Children*

### **General:**

*Annie and the Old One*, Miska Miles, Little, Brown & Company, Boston: 1971. (ages: 6-9)

*Whiskers Once and Always*, Doris Orgel, Viking Penguin, NY: 1986. ISBN: 0-670-80959-4 (ages: 8-12)

*My Grandson Lew*, Charlotte Zolotow, Harper & Row, NY: 1974. (ages: 6-12)

*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*, Leo Buscaglia, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, NY: 1982. ISBN: 0-8050-1064-5 (all ages)

*Coping with Death & Grief*, Marge Eaton Heegaard, Cerner Publications, Minneapolis: 1990. ISBN: 0-8225-00043-4 (ages: 7-12)

*When Dinosaurs Die*, Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown, Little, Brown & Co., Boston: 1996. ISBN: 0-316-10917-7 (ages: 4-9)

*When Someone Very Special Dies*, Marge Heegaard, Woodland Press, Minneapolis: 1988. (ages: 6-12)

*The Kid's Book About Death and Dying*, Eric E. Robes, Little & Brown & Co., Boston: 1985. ISBN: 0-316-75390-4 (ages: 9-12)

*Beyond the Ridge*, Paul Goble, Aladdin Paperbacks of Simon and Schuster, Hong Kong. ISBN: 0-689-71731-8 (North American explanation of death, ages: 5-9)

*The Boy Who Sat by the Window*, Chris Loftis, new Horizon Press, Hong Kong: 1997. ISBN: 0-88282-147-4 (on a violent death, ages: 6-12)

## For a mother's death:

*Nathaniel Talking*, Eloise Greenfield, Black Butterfly Children's Books: NY 1988. ISBN: 0-86316-201-0 (ages: 8-12, minority)

*The Brightest Star*, Kathleen Moresh Hemery, Centering Corp., Omaha, NE: 1990. ISBN: 1-56123-102-9 (ages: 6-9)

## For a father's death:

*Saying Goodbye to Daddy*, Judith Vigna, Albert Whitman & Co., Morton Grove, IL: 1991. ISBN: 0-8075-7253-5 (ages: 4-9)

*A Quilt for Elizabeth*, Bennette W. Tiffault, Centering Corp., Omaha, NE: 1992. ISBN: 1-56123-034-0 (ages: 6-9)

*Dad! Why'd You Leave Me?*, Dorothy R. Frost, Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA: 1991. ISBN 0-8361-3592-x (ages: 6-11)

*I Heard Your Daddy Died*, Mark Scrivani, Centering Corp.

Omaha, NE: 1996. ISBN: 1-56123-087-1 (ages: 6-12)

*The Snowman*, Robin Helen Vogel, Centering Corp., Omaha,

NE: 1994. ISBN 1-561223-068-5 (ages: 7-9)

## For grandparent's death:

*I Know I Made It Happen*, Lynn Bennett Blackburn, Centering

Corp., Omaha, NE: 1991. ISBN 1-56123-016-2 (ages: 6-12)

*Sad Hug, Mad Hug, Happy Hug*, Channing L. Bete Co.

Item number 58198B-1-95. Call 800-628-7733

(ages: pre-kindergarten to 6)

## For sibling death:

*Where's Jess?*, Joy and Marv Johnson, Centering Corp.,

Omaha, NE: 1992. ISBN: 1-56123-009-x (ages: 4-6)

*Am I Still a Sister?*, Alicia M. Sims, Accord, Inc., Louisville, KY:

1998. ISBN: 0-9618995-0-6 (ages: teenagers)

## For a miscarriage:

*Molly's Rosebush*, Janice Cohn, Albert Whitman & Co., Morton Grove, IL. ISBN: 0-8075-5213-5 (ages: 4-8)

## For teenagers:

*How It Feels When a Parent Dies*, Jill Krementz, Alfred A. Knopf: NY: 1981. ISBN: 0-394-75854-4

*Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers*, Earl A. Grollman, Beacon Press, Boston: 1993. ISBN: 0-8070-2501-1

*Forever Friends*, Candy Dawson Boyd, Puffin Books, NY: 1985. ISBN: 0-14-032077-6 (a teenager's death)

## Books for helpers:

*Lean on Me*, Doug Manning, In-Sight Books, Oklahoma City, OK: 1998. (for parents or helpers)

*150 Facts About Grieving Children*, Erin Linn, The Publisher's Mark, Incline Village, NV: 1990. ISBN: 0-9614636-3-5

## *Information Visit*

If you don't know for sure whether you want hospice, ask about an information visit. A hospice nurse or social worker will visit at your home, nursing home or in the hospital to answer questions and explain hospice care. Brochures and other information will be left with you to read at your convenience, along with phone numbers for you to call with questions. When you are ready to begin receiving services, you can call us and an admission visit will be scheduled.

Most importantly, the hospice team will respect and honor your wishes.

*For additional information or for answers to other questions, please don't hesitate to call Kansas City Hospice.*



## Other books in the Safe Passage Series

Understanding Grief

Simple Facts About the Control of Pain

Decisions About Artificial Foods and Fluids

Hospice: A Specialized Program of Comfort, Care and Support

When Death Nears: *Signs and Symptoms*

Provided by Kansas City Hospice as a community service  
*For more information, call (816) 363-2600*

(c) 2003 Kansas City Hospice. All rights reserved.



Kansas City  
Hospice



### **Main Office**

9221 Ward Parkway, Suite 100  
Kansas City, MO 64114  
(816) 363-2600

### **Northland Office**

3100 N.E. 83rd Street  
Suite 2300  
Kansas City, MO 64119  
(816) 468-5700

### **Kansas Office**

12006 W. 87th St. Parkway  
Lenexa, KS 66215  
(913) 894-8228

### **From Lafayette County**

1-800-591-0908

### **From Leavenworth**

1-800-458-3026



Kansas City  
Hospice

[www.kansascityhospice.org](http://www.kansascityhospice.org)