

and fear death, and worry about monsters and devils. You need to reassure them that they did not cause the death.

**Age 9+:** By the age of nine most children understand that death is forever and that it happens to all living things. They may still need to be reminded that when people die they no longer feel pain, cold, lonely, hungry and so on. Young teens will need information about the changes in their life and the impact of the death on their plans.

### What do children need?

After a death in the family, it is normal for you to want to protect yourself and your children from further distress. But it is important to tell children about the death and include them in the grieving of the family. Information: Tell the child what has happened as soon

As possible. If appropriate the person closest to the child should break this news to them. Use simple, clear language. It may seem unkind to use words such as 'dead', but it confuses children if we use phrases such as 'gone to the angels' or 'gone to sleep'. Check back with the child to make sure they understand what they have been told.

**Routines:** Family activities such as meal and bedtimes are often disrupted after a death. As much as possible try to keep up a routine for the child, as familiar activities can help them feel more secure.

**Grief rituals:** Try to include the child in the funeral arrangements and activities. A very young child can make a card. Older children may wish to view the body or have a role in the funeral ceremony. Tell them what to expect and decide how best to include them.

**Expression of feelings:** Let your child know that it is ok to feel all kinds of feelings. Let them know that you too feel sad, angry or fed-up. Let them know who else they can talk to and offer them outlets to express their grief such as drawing, making cards or using puppets.

### How bereaved children react

Your child's reactions will depend on their age and understanding of death, their bond with the person who died, the reactions of other family members and their own personality.

Their reactions to loss may include:

- **sleep disturbance**, including nightmares, waking up early, fear of the dark,
- **withdrawal or clingy behaviour**,
- **angry outbursts and temper tantrums**,
- **overly 'good' behaviour**,
- **anxiety** – including new fears and asking lots of questions about death,
- **physical upsets** – including upset tummy, pains and aches,
- **not wanting to go to school**, or
- **acting like a younger child** – toilet accidents, thumb-sucking.

These symptoms tend to ease over time but may reappear around the time of anniversaries, birthdays or Christmas. Most children are resilient and can adjust to changes in their lives. They settle into new routines but will return to questions about the death as they grow older and need more information. Tell their school about the changes in your child's life. If their symptoms don't subside over time, you might need to ask your doctor or a counsellor for advice.

A small number of children need extra help to process their grief. Signs to look out for include:

- persistent anxiety,
- persistent aggression,
- social withdrawal, lack of interest in friends and activities,
- self-blame or guilt about the death, believing they are at fault, and
- self-destructive behaviour, hurting themselves or expressing a desire to die or to be with the person who has died.

### Other resources

BC Bereavement Helpline (BCBH)  
604-738-9950

[www.bcbereavementhelpline.com](http://www.bcbereavementhelpline.com)

The Family Caregivers Network Society  
<http://www.fcns-caregiving.org/>

Canadian Virtual Hospice  
[http://www.virtualhospice.ca/en\\_US/](http://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/)

Hospice Foundation of America  
<http://www.hospicefoundation.org/>

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For more copies, go online at <http://vch.eduhealth.ca> or email [phe@vch.ca](mailto:phe@vch.ca) and quote Catalogue No. **GV.250.T35**

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## Talking to Children About Death



Explaining death to children can be difficult, particularly when the death is traumatic. With little time to prepare, you may not know how to begin a conversation with children about a death by suicide or murder or other violent death.

It is important that you give children accurate information, appropriate to their age and level of understanding. If possible, a parent or other trusted adult should give the news to the child. While you may want to try to protect children from upsetting details of the death, children need honest information. With young children you may have to limit how much you tell them. In this case you might say something like, “We can talk about this some more when you are bigger.” Children often pick up information from other sources and may know more about the death than you realise.

## Immediately after the death

### 1 Explain that the person has died.

Use simple words and explain gently in a way that the child can understand.

*“Something really sad has happened, Mary died today.”*

With a small child you may need to bend down to be at their eye level. Do not use unclear phrases such as ‘gone to sleep’ or ‘with the angels’, as they can confuse the child.

### 2 Explain how they died.

Give general details about how the death occurred.

*“Daddy died in his car”.*

*“Mary died because she took too many of her tablets.”*

This allows the child to begin to understand what happened and you can add more details later. Too many details can overwhelm a child, but if we leave out too much, children tend to fill in the blanks from their imagination. The child may ask questions or may not need to know anything more for the moment.

### 3 Explain that the person died by suicide.

That may sound harsh, but children need honest information and they will usually learn about the nature of the death from someone else. It helps them to know that they can trust you to tell them the truth and to answer any questions they may have. This also gives you a chance to talk about feeling sad and explain there are always other options, even when we think we are alone with our worries.

If possible take a little time to rehearse what you want to say, as it can be difficult to find the right words. You could adapt the following example:

*“There is something that I need to explain to you about how your daddy died. Sometimes people get very sad and their worries seem very big. That’s how it was for Daddy. He thought that nobody could make things better. He got a bit mixed up and he thought the best thing to do was to end his own life.”*

### 4 Providing a more detailed account of the death

Some children may be able to handle more details immediately. Most children will need time to digest what they have been told and will come back with questions at a later time, as long as you give them the opportunity. Remember the child is trying to piece together what has happened and to

make sense of this change in their life. Use your own judgement about how much detail to give them at this time. You can always say that you think that is enough for now and you can talk again soon.

### 5 Exploring why the person died

It is important to take time with your child to talk about why someone died. Young children often don’t understand that people of all ages die and that there are many different causes of death. Sometimes it is unclear why someone died, or whether the death was accidental or intentional. Share this with the child and let them know that you may give them more information later. Sometimes we never know the full circumstances surrounding a death and

For example:

*“Well we know that Mummy died because she took too many of her tablets, but nobody knows for sure whether she meant to do that or whether she made a mistake.”*

### 6 Making sense of loss

Children may ask the same questions over and over again. They may also ask questions that we struggle to answer, such as “Why did God take Granny away?”, “Can Mummy still see me?”, “Why didn’t Daddy talk to you about his worries?”.

It is ok to tell children that you don’t know the answer to some of their questions. You can explore with them what you believe and ask them what they think. One of the best ways to support a grieving child is to be willing to listen to their questions and worries and give them honest information. Children also need to know that adults grieve too and that you don’t have all the answers. You should tell children that too.

## Childrens grief

Children grieve in their own way following a death and your child’s reaction will depend on the circumstances of their loss.

A child’s way of grieving can be quite different to an adult’s and you may be puzzled by their reactions. Children’s grief is a bit like splashing in puddles; it can rise and be intense at first, then recede and seem to disappear as the child returns to other activities, only to appear again later. Children tend to dip in and out of grief rather than have prolonged periods of grief. As with adults, there is no ‘right’ way to grieve, and most children find a way to cope with loss. It helps if you give them accurate information and they have a supportive adult to guide them.

How children respond to death will depend on their age and their understanding of death. Children under two: Babies and toddlers do not understand the concept of death, but they will respond to changes in their family and the loss of someone close to them. They may be extra clingy and need more comfort and physical attention than usual.

**Age 2 to 4:** At this age the child will still struggle with the idea of ‘forever’. They may say they know that Daddy is dead and then ask when he is coming home. They may include death in their play activities, but have little real understanding of the concept of death.

**Age 5 to 9:** School-age children have a limited understanding of death, but have been exposed to more information about death through television and their friends. They may be curious about death and ask questions about what happens to people when they die. They may also be anxious