

# How to Prepare a Child for the Death of a Loved One



## Newborn to 2

- Infants and toddlers will not understand what happens when someone dies, but they may be able to sense that others are sad around them.
- The best thing you can do for children in this age group is to maintain a predictable routine for them. (i.e. wake up, have breakfast, story time, bring them to babysitter, craft time, dinner, two books, bedtime). Try to keep things the same every day as to give them a sense of security and predictability.
- Have a consistent caregiver for them (try not to take them to 3 different babysitters during the week).
- If they are asking where the loved one is, try to tell them in simple terms. "Grandma died. Grandma won't be coming back." They may ask this again and again, this is normal because that is how they are processing the situation.

## Should we bring them to the funeral?

- This age group can go to a funeral. They will not understand what is happening and they may become more confused (*Why can't I go by grandma? Why is grandma in a box? Why is everyone crying?*). It may be more beneficial to have them stay home with someone they feel comfortable with. If you do want them to go, they may only tolerate a short time of being there. Make sure someone is able to leave with them if they need to leave.

## 3- 5 year olds

When describing death use the words dying, death, dead; avoid using euphemisms such as:

- **"It's like they are sleeping."** (They may correlate sleep with death.)
- **"They are on vacation."** (They may wonder when they are coming back from vacation. They may also be very scared when another loved one really does go on vacation.)
- **"They passed away."** (Children have no idea what the word "passed" means.)
- Explain to your child in very simple terms what dying means. (i.e. "When grandma's body dies, she will not be able to eat, breath, sleep, etc. Grandma's body will stop working.")
- At this age, they do not understand that death is forever. The child may ask you several times "What happened to grandma? Where is she again?" This is very appropriate for children of this age to ask because they are processing the information. Just continue to answer the child as factually and simply as possible. **Example:** "Grandma had cancer. The doctors tried to give her medicine to get her better. The medicine did not work and grandma died. Do you know what this means?"
- Children at this age may be fearful if someone they loved died, then maybe there will be more people that will die around them. A way to help this is to make sure the child knows that someone will always be there to love them and take care of them.
- Another fear of a child at this age is that they did something to cause the illness or that because they were naughty, then that is why their grandma is going to die. Reassure them that it was nothing that they did to cause the person to get sick and die.



- Often children may not know the difference between kinds of illnesses. Make sure you tell them that they cannot “catch” a person’s illness. Let them know that even though they may have kissed or hugged the person, does not mean they will catch what they had.
- After you tell your child that the loved one is going to die, it is very common for children of this age to not cry. That is okay because they don’t understand the finality of the situation. It’s more common to see children of this age cry later on when they are missing that person or something reminds them of that person.
- It is common for this age group to start acting out death. You may see your child “play funeral” with their dolls or blocks. This is all okay and normal because playing is another way children process situations.

### Should we bring them to the funeral?

- Yes they should go to the funeral especially if they are very close to the person that died. The best way to help them is to prepare them for the funeral. **Example:** “We are going to a funeral for grandma. Grandma’s body will be in a box. You don’t have to go up to the box if you don’t want to. Grandma’s body will not be working (she can’t talk, eat, breath).” Have a constant caregiver with them in case they would like to leave. Do not force them to go up to the casket.

## 6 to 9 years

- Some children don’t want to talk about death at all and this is normal. Make sure you give them a journal to write their feelings down in. Some children want to talk about the death with peers and others want to act out their feelings in play. These reactions are also normal as well.
- Children at this age may want to know all of the details about what happened. They may want to know why. Use your own judgment of how many details you want to give them. Being honest is important, but you can decide how many details you think they can tolerate emotionally. **Example:** “Grandma got a cancer that is called lymphoma. The doctors gave her a lot of chemotherapy and they realized that the cancer came back even after they gave her the chemotherapy. No other chemotherapies are going to work. Do you know what this means?”
- Explain to them that crying is okay. Also if you as the adult want to cry in front of the child, that is okay. This shows them that crying is okay and gives them permission to cry if they see you cry.
- Each child will grieve differently. Some will not cry at all and some may cry all the time. Both ways are effective ways of coping.

### Should we bring them to the funeral?

- Yes, let them come to the funeral. Let them know about the rituals that are involved in the funeral such as where the casket will be placed, what the body will look and feel like, how long the visitation lasts, proper etiquette, etc. Even if they are not close to the person that died, it is still okay for them to go. Make sure that you do not force these children to go up to the casket. They may take time to warm up to the situation and that is okay.

## 9 to 12 years

- These children need many details and may need to understand why we couldn’t keep them alive. Often times it may be helpful to have an RN or a doctor present when you tell them so they can help explain why the person is going to die.
- Ask them their thoughts and feelings.
- Allow for spiritual thoughts and feelings.
- Explain the way your family and community grieves and allow them to be a part of the process if they wish.

### Should we bring them to the funeral?

- Yes they should be a part of this. With this age group, you could even let them help be a part of the planning process such as making a picture board or helping choose songs. Please read the section “should they go to the funeral” in the 6-9 year old section above as these are helpful tips for this age group as well.

## Adolescents

- Give as many details about the death as possible. Ask them how much information they would like to know.
- If it is a death of a parent, remind the child he or she does not have to take over the role of being a parent.
- Encourage them to talk to other adults or peers about it.



If you have questions, contact Child Life.

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