



Decoding

Decoding Death: How to talk to your child about death

Death

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In her book *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, American author Carson McCullers wonders how the dead can be truly dead when they still live in the souls of those who are left behind.

Love and happy memories reign over death, and live in hearts forever. Yet, it is inevitable that death of a loved one evokes pain and makes us feel miserable and hopeless. It's important to remember that crying and feeling hurt is natural. We should let our tears flow so that our grief doesn't remain bottled up inside causing greater pain and misery.

[Research](#) portrays that children and young teens across various age groups react to death differently. They all

have their own grieving styles. Losing a loved one isn't easy for adults and for children alike. Writer [Anita Satyajit](#) lost [her mother](#) at sixteen and feels that we often speak of death as a terrible or fearful event, and something to avoid or not talk about. "I believe birth and death are just a part of the soul's journey across lifetimes," she says.

Grief in children under 8

Younger children who are in the age group of 3-5 respond differently to death than their older companions. Kavita Yadav, parenting coach and Founder Director of [JiNa-LivingPositively](#), feels that as younger kids live in their own magical world of wishful thinking. They're bound to be scared or anxious on being separated from a loved one, while seeing other adults grieving. It is essential to patiently explain to the child that a person who dies doesn't come back, and prepare him for the funeral and other rituals. "As younger kids behave differently from the older ones, a child may cry inconsolably on the death of a grandparent or parent one moment and will be playing happily the very next moment," Kavita says.

Kids aged 6-8, are able to understand the concept of birth and death. "Talk to the child about the loss, how you are feeling or thinking and also about the child's feelings," Kavita says. Drawing, storytelling or other simple crafts should be employed so that children are able to express themselves. School teachers should be informed about the situation, so that they're in a position to support her cope with the raw emotions. "Children don't see death as something scary unless you make it scary and fill their heads with stories of ghosts swinging from trees," Anita adds.

Grief and Pre-teens

Children aged nine through eleven will understand the implication of death, and that the dead cannot come back ever. "Although pre-teens understand life events better than younger children, they're likely to have lots of 'why' or 'how' questions," Kavita says. Explain to your child in simple and concrete terms that when the body stops functioning, it dies. But the person's love and memories will remain with us forever. Help the child keep the memories afresh by concentrating on the good qualities and happy memories of the deceased. It might take some time, but returning to routine life helps the child. During this phase it's essential for the child to be in touch with the people who are truly close to him or her.

"Expect changes in the child's behavior in the form of feelings of alienation, misbehavior, or mood swings. If you find yourself short of managing it on your own, take the support of people whom you trust — teachers, coaches or school counselors," Kavita adds. However, we shouldn't force our help on anyone and let them have their solitude if they want it.

Grief in young teenagers

Teen hood is a time in which teenagers search for their identity and independence, and try to break away from parental pressure. However, the news of death or a terminal illness of a loved one can lead to intense feelings of abandonment, anger, frustration and grief. It is essential that adults should be compassionate and calm with the teen, who might be going through so much emotional turmoil. Ask the teen to vent his feelings through written words, framing a picture or cooking a dish which the loved one enjoyed.

The teen might say that he dreams of the deceased, and feels like talking to him or her. This is normal. But such occurrences and intense feelings of numbness, guilt or frustration and grief will ease over time. It might take 3-4 months.

Psychological counselor, personality development consultant and author of [A School Counsellor's Diary](#), Loya Agarwala feels that sometimes the sudden death of a close teenage friend or a much loved family pet or domestic help may evoke more grief than even the death of a grandparent. Adults might not be aware of the significance of the friendship, thus thinking of it as a minor incident. "When grief overwhelms everything and takes centre-stage, there's no fixed time-span to its various stages: denial, shock, bargaining, depression, anger and acceptance – the biggest comfort is to be patient without being judgmental, and to listen without haste, in order for healing to begin," Loya says.

A few red flags to watch out

- Extreme pangs of anxiety, panic, sadness or being distracted, forgetful and inability to concentrate in school.
- Blaming themselves for the death or withdrawing to be alone
- Increased fears of death or concern about safety
- Physical complaints (like headaches or tummy aches) or displaying aggressive behavior
- 'Perfect' behavior or being humorous to mask the emotions
- Risk taking behavior to escape or numb the emotional pain; like drinking or reckless driving.
- Wanting to take on more adult responsibilities

Don't ask a teen to 'get over it' and listen to them patiently. Console them with hugs or cuddles if they like physical affection. Get professional help from a counselor and inform the school teachers so that the situation can be managed better.

Resources:

[Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children](#) by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

[A School Counsellor's Diary](#) By Loya Agarwala

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