

Supporting Grieving Preschoolers

from The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

Explaining death to a young child can feel overwhelming and intimidating. These tips may help you navigate how to talk with and support grieving preschoolers after a death.

Keep it simple.

Tell the truth.

How do I tell my children? It's a question we hear a lot. Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in language young children can understand, and then let their questions guide what else to share. You might say, "Mommy died. This means her body stopped working and the doctors weren't able to fix it." Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they can confuse young children.

If the person died from an illness, it's good to name it—such as cancer or leukemia—rather than saying, "She got really sick and died." Being too vague and general in this situation can create anxiety for young children. For instance, the next time someone gets a cold or flu, preschoolers may worry that the sick person will die.

Even though these discussions can be hard to have, know that being honest and open is an important first step in helping grieving children. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation, and also keeps children from having to use their limited energy and inner resources trying to figure out what happened.

Be prepared for repetition.

Don't be surprised if young children repeatedly ask the same questions about the death or the person who died. Young children often don't understand that death is permanent and may say things like, "I know Daddy died, but will we see him at dinner?" or, "I know Mommy's in Heaven, but will she come home soon?" This doesn't mean you did a bad job explaining; children are just trying to make sense of what happened. You can help by repeating the same simple and honest explanation you gave about the death. You might say, "Honey, remember when I told you that Mommy died and her body stopped working? That means we won't see her at dinner, but if you want, we can look at pictures of her when we get home." It can be painful to have to repeat the story, but know that by doing so you are helping your child to understand.

Talk openly about where the person is now.

When children ask, "Where is Daddy now?" say what you honestly believe. It could be "Daddy's in Heaven with God and out of pain," "When you die you just stop and that's the end of your life," or anything in between. Young children don't always understand "God" or "Heaven", so it's helpful to ask what they think after you explain your beliefs. This will allow you to find out if they have any confusion you can help clear up. You may need to tell the same story over and over until they understand.

Answer honestly about what happened to the body.

Children often wonder about what happens to the body of the person who died. Your explanations should be simple, in language they can understand.



Reassure preschoolers that they are not to blame. Young children may worry that they did something wrong or that they somehow caused the death. Let them know that this is not the case. It's important to explain what happened, while emphasizing that they are not the cause.



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For example, “When a person dies, their body stops working, and they can’t eat or laugh or poop or cry or walk or talk anymore. That means they are dead. When someone is dead, we need to do something with their body, which doesn’t have any feeling in it anymore. Mommy’s body got taken to a place called a funeral home, where they’re taking care of her body for us.”

- If the person is to be buried, you can (as the child asks and expresses interest in knowing) say, “One way we will honor and remember Daddy is by having his body in a kind of box called a casket. We’re going to pick a special place to bury his body, and then we can go visit where they put his body.”
- If the person is to be cremated, you might say, “Mommy’s body doesn’t feel anything anymore; she isn’t in it anymore, so we’re going to have Mommy’s body cremated, which means they put it in a special kind of oven just for people whose bodies have died. In the oven her body gets turned to ashes and then they give us the ashes. We can keep some of them to remember her, or we can put some of them in places she loved, like the beach and the mountains.”

Expect new and/or old behaviors.

Know that it’s common for children to regress to younger behaviors.

A frequent reaction for young children is to regress, both behaviorally and emotionally. Preschoolers might temporarily lose skills they’ve mastered, like dressing themselves, using the potty, tying their shoes, or helping with household chores.



You might also notice changes in their eating and sleeping patterns, or an increase in clingy behavior. Young children may have strong emotions over seemingly small events, like dropping a favorite teddy bear or banging a knee. Providing extra nurturing and support can help preschoolers to feel safe and secure. You can also say something like, “Looks like it’s hard to tie your shoes. I know you know how, but let me help you this time. Next time you can try again.”

Allow for emotional reactions.

Young children may experience many different emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, and joy. Sometimes children don’t have any visible reaction at all. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong feelings in grief, just individual reactions. You can support children by listening to and acknowledging their emotions. With powerful ones like anger and fear, consider finding safe ways that young children can show their feelings without injuring themselves or anyone else. Tossing pillows, building and knocking down blocks, scribbling with crayons, and running outside are a few examples of safe physical outlets. You can also remind young children that while it’s okay to have big feelings (“You are really, really angry right now, and that’s okay”), it’s not okay to hurt anyone or anything (“You can be really angry, but you can’t kick me or throw your toys at the dog.”)

Provide supportive environments

Create space for play.

Young children use play, rather than talking, as a way to express themselves. Playing with dolls and puppets allows preschoolers to tell their stories. Art materials provide a way to put feelings into creative activities, so get out the crayons, paper, markers, paint, clay, and other supplies.

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You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of photos, or drawing a picture, but be open to their ideas and suggestions for projects. Some preschoolers will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression, so be sure to create time and space for them to engage in big energy play, like running or jumping. Moving and playing offer safe ways to express strong emotions.

Remember the person who died.

Young children may not have many memories about the person who died. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life: "Your daddy really liked this song," or "Your mom was the best painter I know." Children often appreciate having pictures and possessions of the person who died. With photos, it's helpful to make copies to give to young children so that they can carry them around without the fear of tearing or damaging the originals. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures preschoolers might like, ask which ones are important to them.



If you find yourself wondering what preschoolers need, it's best to start by asking them: *How can I help you? What do you want? What do you need?* You might be surprised by their response!

Establish structure and routine.

Routines and consistency are especially comforting for younger children.

Life is often in upheaval after a death, so finding ways to create safety and predictability is helpful for preschoolers. For example, you might create routines around breakfast, school, and bedtime. Children may also need some flexibility: This way they know what to expect (bedtime is at 7:30pm), but can also trust that if they need something else (tonight we can read an extra story), their world will be responsive.

Give young children choices.

Young children appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. When someone dies, children can feel powerless and out of control. Giving preschoolers choices can help them regain a sense of power and trust that they can have a say in their lives. Provide choices that are in line with their developmental level, for example: *Would you like cereal or toast for breakfast? Which stuffed animal would you like to sleep with? Who would you like to sit with at the memorial service?*

Talking with young children about death is not an easy thing to do, but adults sometimes make it harder than it needs to be. Children are curious and appreciate knowing the truth.

Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 30,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades. To order online, visit www.dougy.org or www.tdcbookstore.org or call 503.775.5683.



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