

Talking with children about grief and death

Talking with children about death

When speaking with children about death, like any potentially emotional topic, it is wise to start by trying to elicit the child's understanding of what has occurred.

Although talking about death and dying can be challenging, children are never too young to do so. Speaking of death allows children to know it is okay to ask questions and to discuss their feelings.

Talking about it helps them to make sense of what they are feeling. Not talking about death and dying with children can leave them with fears and misunderstanding.

Children's understanding of death comes from factors such as their developmental age, previous experiences, and their family, culture and religion.

Their understanding can also be affected by the nature of the death, the deceased person's connection to them, their shared relationship, and the manner in which family and social supports mediate the experience for the child.

For information on the practices of many of the major religious groups currently living in Australia see:

- *Customs, Beliefs, Death and Dying* produced by Loddon Mallee Religious Palliative Care Consortium. <https://lmpcc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Customs-Beliefs-Death-Dying.pdf>
- *Death, Dying and Grieving – a cultural perspective* produced by the Australian Multicultural Foundation. amf.net.au/library/uploads/files/Dying_Death_and_Grief_Conf.pdf

Tips for supporting bereaved children

- Explaining death to a child can be difficult. Try to use the word 'death' or 'dead' rather than phrases such as 'gone to sleep', 'passed away', 'lost', 'gone'.
- Be prepared to repeat information as many times as asked. Children may need reminders that the deceased person won't come back, and of the permanency of death, according to their developmental level.
- Children benefit from having the cause of death explained to them. This should be done simply and in language that they can understand. If children are not given a clear explanation they may blame themselves.
- Children often grieve in waves. They can switch from being very sad to happily playing in a short space of time; this does not mean they are unaware of what has happened.

Additional fact sheets and advice are available through the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, see: www.grief.org.au

Developmental responses to death

The following table outlines key developmental responses to death. Use these responses to plan your communication and support for affected students.

Child's age	Understanding of death	Common reactions
3–5 years	Developing an understanding that dead things are motionless, not breathing. Believe that dead things can come back or that they are living in another place such as heaven.	Worries about separation, regression in milestones, pining and withdrawal.
6–9 years	Increased understanding that people die and do not come back. They may think that their own actions (such as misbehaving or wishing that someone might die) have brought about the death.	Superstitious actions, anger, separation, concern, regression, interest in the physical nature of what happens when you die and questions about funerals and burial/cremation.
10–12 years	Full understanding that death is final, that the person is not coming back, and that death is inevitable and irreversible.	Responses are similar to that of an adult. May have fears about self and others; feelings of responsibility are not unusual.
12+ years	Full understanding.	Withdrawn, sad, loss of interest, guilt, shame and worry about the future.

Supporting people with disabilities to cope with grief and loss

Regardless of a person's disability, people are likely to feel the absence of someone they cared for and who has been part of their life. Changes in behaviour may be indicative of how the person is responding to a death.

People who have disabilities require access to appropriate supports and information for dealing with grief and loss. Additional supports that are developmentally appropriate, and accessible, can assist people to understand what has happened and use coping skills to manage their reactions.

For pictorial aids to assist understanding and expression for people with a range of cognitive and communication abilities, see www.anglicarewa.org.au/docs/default-source/get-help/mental-health0-services/care-basket/supporting-people-with-disabilities-grief-loss---scope.pdf?sfvrsn=9a8a96b2_2