FREE GUIDE

Talking to Kids About Loss

Age-appropriate language for one of the hardest conversations.

Ask Dr. Penny
Comfort, care, hope · askdrpenny.com

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

What children need most

Children notice far more than we think. When something sad happens and no one explains it, they often fill the gap with their own, scarier stories. Honest, simple words are a gift, even when they are hard to say.

- **Tell them soon,** and ideally from someone they trust, in a quiet, familiar place.
- **Use clear words.** "Grandpa died. His body stopped working and it will not start again."
- **Keep it short.** Answer the question they asked. They will come back with more when they are ready.
- **Show your feelings.** It is fine for children to see you cry. It teaches them that sadness is safe.
- **Reassure them.** Who will take care of them, and that nothing they did or thought caused this.

> ### It is all right not to have every answer
> "I don’t know, but I will tell you what I find out" is an honest and comforting reply.

AGES 3 TO 5

Little ones

Young children do not yet understand that death is permanent. They may ask when the person is coming back, many times. That is not because they were not listening. It is how they learn.

- Use short, concrete sentences: "Her body stopped working. She can’t eat or breathe or feel hurt anymore."
- Expect the same question again and again, and give the same simple answer.
- Keep routines steady: meals, naps and bedtime help them feel safe.
- Watch for grief in play. Acting out funerals or hospitals with toys is a healthy way to work it through.
- Offer extra cuddles and closeness. Some regression, like bedwetting or clinginess, is common for a while.

> *He died, and that means we won’t see him again. We can still remember him and love him.*
>
> A simple way to say it

AGES 6 TO 9

School-age children

Children this age are starting to understand that death is final and that it can happen to anyone. That can bring new worries about their own safety and the safety of the people they love.

- Answer factual questions honestly, including about what happened. Leave out graphic details.
- Expect "what if" questions: "Will you die too?" Reassure them about who looks after them, and that most people live a very long time.
- Give them a role, if they want one: choosing a photo, drawing a picture for the service, planting a flower.
- Let their teacher know, so school can be a soft place to land.
- Notice changes in sleep, schoolwork or friendships, and check in gently.

Try this

Make a memory box together with photos, drawings and small objects. Children often find it easier to talk while their hands are busy.

AGES 10 AND UP

Preteens and teens

Older children understand death much as adults do, but they may hide their grief to protect you, or to fit in with friends. Their grief can look like irritability, withdrawal, or keeping very busy.

- Be honest and include them in decisions where you can, such as parts of the service.
- Talk side by side rather than face to face: in the car, on a walk, while cooking.
- Respect that they may grieve with friends or online. Stay curious rather than critical.
- Share a little of your own grief, without leaning on them as your main support.
- Keep reasonable expectations at home and school, with extra flexibility for a while.

> *You don't have to talk now. I'm here whenever you want to, even if it's late at night.*
>
> A door you can leave open

CHOOSING WORDS

Words that help, words that confuse

Gentle phrases adults use can be confusing or frightening for children, who often take words literally.

Phrases that can confuse

- **"We lost Grandma."** A child may wonder why no one is looking for her.
- **"She went to sleep."** This can make bedtime frightening.
- **"He went away."** Children may wait for him to come back, or fear that others will leave too.
- **"God needed another angel."** Some children feel angry at God, or afraid of being chosen next.

Clearer words

- "Grandma died. Her body stopped working."
- "It’s okay to feel sad, angry, or confused. All of those feelings are allowed."
- "Nothing you did or said made this happen."
- "We will remember him together, and you can ask me anything."

If your family has a faith, it can bring real comfort. Share what you believe, alongside the plain facts of what happened.

LOOKING AHEAD

When a child may need more support

Grief in children comes and goes. Consider talking with a counselor or your pediatrician if, for more than a few weeks, a child: has trouble sleeping or eating; struggles at school or pulls away from friends; seems very anxious about their own or your safety; or talks about wanting to be with the person who died.

The words I want to use when I tell them:

Questions I expect, and how I might answer:

People who can support my child (family, teacher, faith leader, counselor):

WHEN YOU NEED MORE

You do not have to do this alone.

Supporting a grieving child while you are grieving yourself is one of the hardest things a parent or caregiver can do. Consider reaching out to a counselor, for your child or for you, if:

- Your child's grief has not softened at all after several weeks or months.
- Their sleep, eating, schoolwork or friendships have changed in ways that worry you.
- You feel too depleted to be the support you want to be.
- Your family keeps getting stuck in the same arguments or silences.

If you are in crisis, reach out now

Call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (US), or call 911 if you or someone else is in immediate danger. Outside the US, contact your local emergency number.

About Ask Dr. Penny

Ask Dr. Penny Counseling offers individual, grief, family, and faith-based counseling, in person and by video. Sessions move at your pace, and most first appointments happen within a week.

Book a session at askdrpenny.com

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