

ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT DEATH



Bright Horizons.

Early Education & Preschool

Children need our views about life, the natural world, and social issues articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They observe not just what we say but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature; our spirituality; and our willingness to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that empathy on to our children.

For every age, the answer is a developmentally appropriate version of “Everything that is alive dies sometimes. Death is a part of life.” Natural disasters, as with terrorism or war, bring the idea and reality of death to the forefront of children’s lives. Adults create a climate of security or insecurity by their behaviors. If children experience a wall of silence or a storm of grief, they may not feel able to ask questions. Adults need to try to establish an atmosphere where children’s feelings, questions, and needs are taken into account. Children react to how the adults in their lives react to death and dying. The personal feelings and behaviors that they witness will create a climate of security or insecurity.

WHEN LOVED ONES DIE

While it is very sad when people or animals we care about die, we need to remember how wonderful it was to have our time with them and keep them alive in our memories. Children under 3 years old experience the death of a loved one as an unsettling absence or the presence of sadness or emotional turmoil around them. They simply need our presence, warmth, and strength. Older children need the same, but also our understanding of their feelings.

To preschool children, death is another mysterious part of life. If someone who cares for them dies, they often feel abandoned. It is the absence that counts because they don’t understand the finality of death or the emotional weight of grieving. The death of others is mostly a big deal to them because it is important to us; it upsets them because it upsets us.

Because young children believe the world revolves around them, they may feel that a death was something that they caused. They need reassurance that the person’s absence is not the result of their own actions or feelings.

Older children understand that death is permanent and share our struggle with coming to terms with the “why” of it: “Why now?” “How will we carry on and get over it?” Their grief and sadness can be as deep as our own if it was someone they love. They can begin to identify with the loss that others experience. The knowledge that death is final leaves them wondering about their own death and the possible deaths of people they know. They may feel that death is a punishment for those who died or their loved ones.

Reading books and having conversations both prior to and after the death of a loved one can help children understand that death is part of the cycle of life. Death is also simply interesting to school-aged children. They are often fascinated with the cause and details of the death and its aftermath. They understand death as a physical experience and often are concerned about the body, as many preschool-aged children would be as well: What happened to them? What will happen to them now?

Children and families who have or are experiencing the death of a loved one under traumatic circumstances need to draw on extended family and friends for support.

MORE ON HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE

When crisis or catastrophe occurs, the most important work we can do after ensuring children's physical safety, is to be thoughtful and responsive to their emotional and educational needs. The family is a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears with assurance that their parents will protect them and teach them about the world that they will inherit.

If a child's family does not provide this safe haven, it is important that other adults in their lives do. Most children have at least one caring adult in their lives, but it is the job of all of us to ensure they never have less than one.

Talking to Children About Crisis and Catastrophe

Many of the questions and concerns that surface in times of crisis have at their heart the fundamental questions:

- ▶ Will I be OK?
- ▶ Will you be OK?
- ▶ Will everyone I know and love be OK?
- ▶ Will the world that I know be OK?

Help the child:

Identify his or her own fears through gentle conversation that follows the child's lead. Ask the child what they wonder, what they think, what they imagine. Respect the child's fears and remember that fear is not always rational.

Always try to be realistic while reassuring the child that it is unlikely the catastrophe will happen again the same way. Assure the child that if there is a next time, “We will be ready” (even if you are not feeling entirely sure yourself).

In the aftermath of a crisis or catastrophe, children will have a range of reactions. If they have been in harm’s way or vulnerable, their wariness, fear, and anxiety will likely increase. If they have only heard about it, they may be curious and even seem cavalier in response. Alternately, they may feel empathy and sorrow for the people who are experiencing it. Some of their reaction depends on how the adults around them are responding.

Young children have limitations in how they can respond to and process emotions, and a spectrum of reactions is normal. The comforting, thoughtful presence of an adult helps dispel young children’s fears. Older children also rely on the strong presence of adults and their rationality and optimism.

In these circumstances, children need to hear that:

- ▶ People are working very hard to learn more about early warnings of natural disasters or violent attacks and ways to prevent loss of life and damage to society.
- ▶ As a family or school community, we will devise plans to be prepared and safe.
- ▶ I am always here for you and will do everything I can to protect you.

ANSWERING CHILDREN’S QUESTIONS

Children need our best answers, or our honest lack of an answer. Sometimes all we can say is, “Bad things sometimes happen without a reason, but we will always do everything we can to protect ourselves so the chance of a bad thing happening is smaller.” Use examples from your own life that they can understand, such as wearing a seat belt to protect themselves in case there is an accident or cutting up food in small bites to avoid choking. Children need our thoughtfulness and willingness to help them seek answers. No child will ever thank us for lying or avoiding questions.

Before Talking to Children

Even if we only have a moment to think about what to say and how to say it, try to remember to:

Get your own feelings and thoughts straight. Have another adult listen to you first if you aren’t sure you are ready to talk to a child. Try to be your most thoughtful, calm, and emotionally stable self when you talk to children. Be prepared for the inevitable difficult questions about what bad things could happen to us, why people die, and why some people live. Think not only about what you want to say, but also about how you want it

to come across. Watch your words, tone, and body language. You may give a nonverbal message of sadness, anger, confusion, fear, or indifference.

Clarify. Ask children what they think the words that they are using or hearing mean: death, drowning, loss, weather, disaster, hurricane, looter, hero, terrorist, victim, refugee. Understand what your child already knows and feel before beginning any dialogue by asking, “What are you thinking and feeling?”

Observe. Find natural opportunities to ask what’s on the child’s mind and follow his or her lead. Recognize the clues in a child’s art, play, or conversations with friends. Accept his or her feelings. Read thoughtfully chosen picture books to support children’s understanding.

Check first before assuming either a lack of or strong interest. When you encourage a young child to draw, play, or talk about his or her feelings, you give permission to freely express scary or angry thoughts.

Use emotional self-regulation. Honestly share your feelings, but always try to be in control of your emotions in the presence of your children.

Be strong in a crisis even when feeling sad, scared, confused, or angry. The child needs to draw upon your strength, not take care of you. Demonstrate resilience and optimism.

Offer physical comfort. Provide the child hope by simply sharing hugs or reassuring smiles that say “I’m here for you and we will make it through this.”

Adapt your response to a child’s developmental level and needs. While a young child may need to hear, “Lots of strong, smart people are working hard to keep us safe,” an older child may need to help you plan what to do or help research efforts to prevent natural disasters.

Monitor and limit children’s exposure to media coverage of disasters and crises. Children have not seen much of life or weathered many storms and can easily feel that everything, everyone, everywhere is coming apart. The quantity and intensity of television, radio, and newspaper coverage, as well as adult conversations during a crisis, can easily frighten children, and adults should try to manage those images.

Offer additional context. Consider that natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis will spark an interest in environmental concerns as well as issues of poverty and race for older children. Respect the growing ability of school-age children and teenagers to understand and discuss issues openly and honestly.

Stay tuned in. Keep listening, asking, conversing with, and reassuring children as their thoughts and feelings evolve. Remember that every child is different. The explanation of national, global, or personal events needs to match the child’s developmental understanding and personality. Don’t give more information than the child is ready for.

Protect children's idealism. Children are born idealists: The world is a good place where nature is usually friendly and predictable, people are mostly good, and life is worth living. Sudden exposure to catastrophe or violence tests their idealism and optimism as well as our own. If children are exposed to too much of life's dark side, they may lose their sense of optimism and start to experience toxic stress.

Stay alert to signs of stereotyping and racism. In times of conflict or exposure to societal issues, "us versus them" mentalities, ethnic and social class stereotypes, and contempt for behaviors different from our own may lead to racism and cultural bias. In times of crisis, we can inadvertently make harmful assumptions about groups of people and make false correlations. Though often unintentional, this can cause damaging, lasting effects. More than ever, we need to teach children to accept and respect cultural and social groups different from theirs and see the good in other people. Children need us to model tolerance, respect for diversity, and an interest in learning about other people, cultures, and countries. In every conversation, work toward greater understanding across ethnic, cultural, and social class lines. Be your best as a human being.

Honor children's need to have some control and find ways for them to contribute. Our sense of power is restored by taking steps to improve our own current situation or to increase our preparedness for future situations. Finding ways to connect with others in the community and around the world to show our common humanity has the same result. Younger children can draw thank-you pictures for police officers and help pack a natural disaster survival kit. Older children may also want to help create a family emergency plan, communicate with a pen pal, or collect donations.

Challenge assumptions and overgeneralizations. Older children and teens are cultivating their worldviews. This matures over time, but is heavily influenced by their early experiences and by adult perspectives and opinions. Without a broad context, they readily and unconsciously integrate what they observe and hear. Help them develop a conscientious and curious approach to learning about the world by modeling these characteristics yourself, especially when it's hardest to do. For example, if a group of people from one country or religion commits a terror attack, it is important not to generalize that all from that country or religion are bad or evil.