

# Questions

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When someone close to a child dies, for example, a parent or grandparent, the child, like any adult, needs to grieve. Sometimes adults think the best way to protect a child is to avoid talking about the person who has died or about their death. We often find it difficult to talk about death but talking can be an important part of grieving. Just because a child seems to be getting on with their life it cannot be assumed that they are not grieving inwardly. Let your child know that you are there when, and if, he or she wants to talk.

Children cannot be protected from sadness, and losing someone you love is very, very sad. Children are quick to sense an adult's unease and may not feel able to seek the answers to the questions that are troubling them. Therefore, it may help to anticipate some of the possible questions your child may want to ask. If you feel more comfortable talking about difficult issues, then your child will also feel more confident talking about the person who has died and what is happening to themselves or other family members.



## Questions about death and what happens afterwards

- What is death?
- Why do people die?
- When do people die?
- Is death forever?
- What happens after death?
- Do people have a soul?
- What is a soul?
- What is heaven?
- If granny is in heaven, why is it that she is buried?
- Can granny see me from heaven?
- Can I telephone heaven?
- Why can't I put up an extra long ladder to heaven?

## What to say

Usually when people are ill doctors are able to make them well again, but sometimes the person's body cannot fight the illness, or the person is very old and their body is worn out.

Death occurs when someone's body stops working. It may have been damaged by a bad accident. It may have been damaged by very serious illness or disease. It may just be worn out by old age.

Dying is the process or event that results in a person's death. It is important for young children to be told that when people die nothing can bring them back.

There is a lot we don't know about death. Every culture has different beliefs about what happens after a person dies. People may hold very strong views. But many cultures also share some beliefs. Often people believe that we consist of both a physical body and a soul or spirit.

## There is a lot we don't know about death.

The soul is believed to be the part of us that makes us special and gives us our personality. Sometimes children and adults are comforted by the idea of heaven or a similar place where a person is free from pain and no longer ill. Sometimes children (and adults) can feel angry at God.

The answers you try to give to such questions will depend on your spiritual beliefs. It is all right not to know all the answers, but try to be as honest as you can with your child and try not to be afraid of facing difficult issues that your child wants to raise.

## Questions about funerals

- What is a funeral?
- What happens at a funeral?
- What do people wear to funerals?
- Why do people dress up?
- How long does the funeral last?
- Will people cry at the funeral?
- Can I go to the funeral?
- What happens after the funeral?
- What is cremation?
- Will it hurt?

## What to say

It is important to talk to children about the funeral beforehand, especially if they have never been to a funeral before so that they have some idea what to expect. Funerals are special ceremonies usually held in a religious building such as a chapel or church, or perhaps a temple or mosque.

Funerals give everyone who cared about the person a chance to be together to remember the person and are a way of saying goodbye to the person who has died and to celebrate their life.

The body of the person who has died is usually in a coffin, music is usually played and someone speaks about the person who has died. People may bring flowers or make a gift to a particular charity instead.

The body may be buried in the ground or cremated – burnt in a very hot furnace or fire. The child needs to know that the burning of the body cannot be seen. The ashes may be scattered in a special place or somewhere which has special memories for you. It is important for a child to know that whatever happens to the body after death, it doesn't hurt – the body cannot feel anything.

## Questions about the person who died

- What exactly happened when my Mum died?
- Did you see her die?
- Was she in pain?
- What did the doctor say?

## What to say

Not knowing what has happened can make someone else's death even more upsetting and frightening. So it is important to tell children what they need to know in as much detail as they require. This, of course, will vary according to the age of your child and their level of understanding, but never underestimate a child's capacity to understand. Be guided by your child by allowing and enabling them to ask what questions they want.

## Questions about me

- Will I die?
- Can I catch cancer?
- Was it my fault?

## What to say

Children may also be frightened that they are going to die too. Knowing the reason that the person died may help to take away some of that fear. Such fears are very real and should never be dismissed. Children often feel guilty – that they somehow contributed directly or indirectly to the person's death. It is very common for a child to feel responsible for a family death. For example, they may believe that if only they hadn't been naughty or made so much noise, or had helped more or loved the person more, the person would not have died.

However, the child needs to know that being naughty does not cause someone else to die and that however kind and loving someone is it cannot stop someone from dying. Similarly the child may have felt angry with the person who has died and wished that they weren't there or didn't take up so much time. It is important for children to know that wishes and thoughts cannot make someone die.

Everyone says and does things that later they wish they hadn't. It is often helpful to concentrate on good memories and happy experiences.

## Questions about who will take care of me

- Will my other parent die?
- Will we have to move?
- Will I have to change school?
- Will we have enough money to live on?
- Will we still go on holiday?
- Will I still get pocket money?
- Who will help me with my homework?

## What to say

After the death of a parent, children may fear that their other parent or the person looking after them may die too – especially if the other person becomes ill. Young children may believe that all illnesses have the same outcome; reassurance can be very helpful. If a child is afraid to go to school it may be helpful to contact the school and talk to their teacher.

Perhaps they would allow extra phone calls during the day, for example, so that the child has a plan and feels more in control. Children may worry about how their family will manage financially or whether they will need to move house or school.



Often there will be quite major changes for a child following the death of a close family member. It is best to be honest with your child. Children may not like what you tell them but most will prefer to know rather than to guess and worry about things. It may be that the news is better than they expect. Children need to feel emotionally secure as well as physically safe, so make sure that they know you will be there for them.

## Questions about the future

- Will my sad feelings go away?
- Will I ever feel happy again?
- Can I go to the cemetery?
- Can I make a special card to take to the cemetery?
- Will we be together when I die?
- Will I forget my Mum?

## What to say

Getting over someone's death doesn't mean forgetting. It just means that you start to feel less upset. You do not forget the person who has died but you find a way of giving them a new place in your life and your memories.

It is important that your child does not feel he or she is betraying the person who has died by getting on with their life.

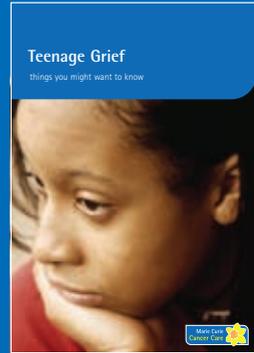


It will probably be helpful to mark anniversaries in some special way, perhaps monthly at first and then each year. Perhaps your child would like to make a card or pick a flower to take to the cemetery or garden of remembrance. It is often a good idea to let your child choose something that belonged to the person who has died as a memento.

## Further help

If you want to talk to someone in confidence about issues raised in this booklet, contact the children and young people's counsellor or a social worker at your Marie Curie Hospice.

## Other booklets in this set:



For information about cancer and other conditions,  
plus links to websites offering information and support,  
visit: [www.mariecurie.org.uk/patientsandcarers](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/patientsandcarers)



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