

How do I answer my children's questions about death?

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Children want and need to learn and understand about the world. Death is a part of life, and if we do not answer children's questions we may leave them alone with their fears and unprotected from their fantasies. However, it can feel very difficult to know what to say and how best to help. The following points may be helpful:

- Children tend to ask their questions in the middle of everyday conversations. Don't be surprised if they change the subject abruptly when they have had enough. They will take in as much as they can manage. You do not have to give all the information in one session.
- Accept that these conversations will feel uncomfortable. Whatever is said is just an opening, even if the words come out wrong the child will know that you valued them enough to make an attempt.
- Think about what the child knows already. Check this out by asking them what they think and believe as they may have picked up information at school or through friends that you don't know about.
- Use simple clear language and avoid confusing explanations. Telling a child that 'We lost auntie' may provoke the response 'Let's go and find her then'.
- If young children ask what dead means, it can be helpful to say something concrete and specific like 'A dead body can't breath, can't eat, won't wake up and can't go to the toilet...'
- Check out what they have understood by asking them to repeat it back to you. If it comes back in their words and still makes sense you know they have got the message.
- There are not always answers. It is all right to say 'I don't know'.
- Be prepared for them to come back with more questions when they have taken in the answers to the first ones.
- If the subject is painful for you, it may be helpful to tell them why. 'I find it makes me sad to talk about death because my own dad died a few years ago and I still miss him very much...' Children will read you body language and will know if you are upset, so you need to explain.
- Remember that children need realistic reassurance. Most people do die when they are old, but young people and even children die of serious illness or in an accident.
- Children are often very curious about ritual and may ask lots of questions about funerals. One possible answer is 'A funeral is special time when everybody who knew the person who died can come together to remember them. There are often special prayers and songs. Some people cry. Everyone thinks a lot about the person who died'.