

## DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DEATH

Provide accurate and honest information for every developmental stage

### INFANT-TODDLER (0 to 3 years old)

View death as a loss, separation, or abandonment. They sense sadness or anxiety and are greatly impacted by the response of their caregivers and others around them.

#### Possible responses/behaviors:

- May exhibit changes in sleeping, eating, and mood (increased clinging, decreased appetite, irritable)
- May have difficulty separating from caregivers

#### How to help:

- Keep normal routine and structure when possible
- Provide consistent nurturing by parent or other caregivers

### PRESCHOOLERS (3 to 5 years old)

- Understand words literally
- Difficulty understanding abstract concepts. For example: heaven, spiritual processes
- Magical thinking: Feel that thoughts, actions, or feelings may have caused the death or that death is punishment for doing something bad

#### Possible responses/behaviors:

- May revert to an earlier stage of development (bed wetting or baby talk)
- May seem unaffected by the death
- May talk very matter of fact about the death
- May exhibit changes in sleeping, eating, behavior
- May have difficult separating from caregivers

#### How to help:

- When talking about death, use words like death, died, and body stopped working.
  - Avoid terms like: passed on, passed away, gone to sleep, and lost
- Keep normal routines/discipline when possible
- Provide opportunities to play, draw, express feelings
- Offer reassurance that nothing the child did, said, or thought caused the death to happen
- Prepare them for what to expect related to funeral/good-bye rituals

### SCHOOL-AGE (5 to 12 years old)

- May begin to view death as final
- May blame self for death and experience feelings of guilt
- Increased curiosity of illness, death, and what happens to the body/spirit after death
- Open to learning coping tools and emotional support

#### Possible responses/behaviors:

- May be reluctant to share initially, but later have a strong grief reaction
- May exhibit a wide range of emotions such as shock, denial, anxiety, fear, or withdrawal

#### How to help:

- Provide permission to cry and to share thoughts and feelings
- Identify specific fears or misconceptions and address worries of potential feelings of guilt
- Provide opportunities for self-expression such as play, drawing, art, and journaling
- Offer reflective times to share memories
- Maintain daily routines/discipline when possible
- Encourage participation in funeral/good-bye rituals

### TEEN (12 to 18 years old)

- Understand that death as inevitable, universal, and irreversible
- Questions the meaning of life, search for meaning in death, and seek spiritual/religious support
- May want to be fully involved with family discussions and decision making
- Complex moral/ethical dilemma processing

#### Possible responses/behaviors:

- May engage in risk taking behaviors (driving fast, drug/alcohol experimenting, sexually acting out)
- May socially/emotionally withdraw
- May use social media for expression and communication
- May benefit from peer support

#### How to help:

- Be available, but respectful of need for privacy
- Help them identify peers or other trust adults with whom they can share their feelings
- Discuss changes that may occur in the family structure/dynamics since death
- Model healthy coping behaviors (maintaining activities and routines)

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR CHILDREN GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

### Children

*When Dinosaurs Die* (A guide to understanding death)  
Laurie Kesney Brown and Marc Brown

*I Miss You: A First Look at Death*  
Pat Thomas

*Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*  
Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

*Ocho Loved Flowers*  
Anne Fontaine  
(Book is about a pet cat that dies, but still applicable for people or pets. Focuses on anticipatory death)

*When Someone Dies*  
Sharon Greenlee

*Badger's Parting Gifts*  
Susan Varley  
(Good for the death of a grandparent)

*Always and Forever*  
Alan Durant  
(Good for the death of a grandparent-Similar concept to *Badger's Parting Gifts*, but with less words)

*What on Earth Do you Do When Someone Dies?*  
Trevor Romain  
(School-Age+)

*The Invisible String*  
Patrice Karst  
(Not directly about death, but the story is about remembering that you're never alone)

### Teenagers

*Fire in my Heart, Ice in my Veins: A Journal for Teenagers Experiencing a Loss*  
Enid Samuel-Traisman, M.S.W.

*Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve*  
Jenny Lee Wheeler

### For Parents and Caregivers Providing Support for Children/Teens

*Healing the Grieving Child's Heart: 100 Practical Ideas For Families, Friends and Caregivers*  
Alan Wolfelt

*Healing a Teens' Grieving Heart*  
Alan Wolfelt

*Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies*  
Theresa M. Huntley

*How Do We Tell the Children? A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children Cope When Someone Dies*  
Dan Schaefer et al

### Pregnancy Loss

*Something Happened*  
Cathy Blanford

### Alzheimer's

*Such a Pretty Young Lady: Grandma's Journey with Alzheimer's*  
Bailey Wachholz

*Grandfather's story cloth*  
Linda Gerdner

### Feelings

*In My Heart: A Book of Feelings*  
Jo Witek