

## **How Do I Tell the Children**

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“How do I tell the child in my life about the death of our loved one?” “How can I be supportive of him or her during this difficult time?” These can be confusing and painful questions for a parent or grandparent. Although the circumstances of the death and the people involved are always unique and require sensitivity, these guidelines seem to be helpful to most people, most of the time.

Guidelines for talking with children about the death of a loved one:

1. Give the child the facts gently and honestly. Keep in mind the age of the child and communicate with her in a way she can understand. For a young child, you might say that death happens when a person’s body is so broken that it cannot be fixed.
2. Reassure him that he will always be taken care of, that he or other family members will not likely die soon or from the same illness or cause of death. Reassure him that the family is going through a very sad time, but that the family will not fall apart.
3. Include the child in the planning and participation of the funeral or memorial service, if he wishes to be involved in some way. Explain to him what will take place at the service and give him choices and options regarding what he can do, or if he would like to attend at all. Provide a special person for the child in case he becomes upset or would like to leave.
4. Encourage her to get her feelings out through talking, artwork, music, or physical activity and play. Affirm and validate feelings as they come and emphasize that grief is normal and necessary. Model expressing sadness by allowing children to see your tears.
5. Explore and discuss your spiritual beliefs about life after death. The benefit of discussing death in spiritual terms is that it gives your child a picture of how death fits in life’s bigger picture. Use images such as a butterfly or the changes of the seasons to explain the transformation from death to new life. Avoid using euphemisms such as “Mom passed away” or “Grandpa went to be with God now”. Such phrases give the impression that the loved one may return or that somehow death is not permanent. Also avoid using phrases such as “God needed Dad in heaven now”. This gives the impression that God is petty and selfish, and your child may worry that God may “need” them, you, or other family members in heaven soon.

What has happened in your family is very sad. If only it was possible, you would do anything to spare the child in your life the heartache of losing their loved one in death, but you cannot rescue them from the pain of grief. However, you can help your child by practicing these guidelines and allowing the healing process of grief to unfold. The Pathways of Hope Grief Counseling Center at Hospice of Dayton offers a variety of services to children that can help with the process of grief including 1:1 grief counseling and Art Therapy, children’s grief support groups on site and at schools, and Camp Pathways.