

## **Explaining death and dying to children**

### **Is it good to be honest with children about death and dying?**

Children and young people want and need adults to be honest, particularly when talking about death and grief. If we do not tell them the truth, their active imaginations can fill in the gaps often with more frightening misconceptions.

### **How can I explain to a child what happens when someone dies?**

A simple biological explanation of death is helpful: the heart stops beating, the lungs do not work so the person cannot breathe, and their brain stops working. Referring to the body left as an empty shell can help them to understand that the person is no longer alive as they knew them. If the family holds any beliefs, these can then be introduced.

It can be helpful to explain that when someone dies, they cannot feel hot or cold, hungry or thirsty, and they are not in pain. It is also important for them to understand that the person will stay dead, however much we may wish them to come back to life as they were.

### **What sort of language should I use to explain death and dying to a child?**

Phrases such as 'gone to sleep' or 'passed away' or words such as 'gone' or 'lost' may feel kinder but are misleading and can lead to confusion; for instance, we encourage children to 'find' things that they have 'lost' so they may continue to look for the person who has died. Similarly, using the term 'gone to sleep' may lead them to associate going to sleep with dying which can result in anxieties at bedtime.

### **What if a child feels upset when we talk about death or dying?**

Talking about death can elicit emotional reactions. This can feel difficult, but by acknowledging this and talking openly about death and grief, it can help children and young people to trust in the adults around them. It will also encourage them to ask questions, share any worries and express their feelings.

### **What should I say to a child if I feel upset when I talk about death or dying?**

Children learn from the adults around them, so if you experience an emotional reaction, it is best to acknowledge your feelings while reassuring them that you will be OK in a moment. This will help them to know that it is OK to express their own feelings.

### **How can I answer questions children often ask about death or dying?**

Although it can feel quite daunting, it is important to answer any questions as honestly and fully as possible. Although it might seem tempting to try and distract children and young people, this may actually cause them to become more anxious than hearing the truth.

### **Will I die? Will you die? Why do people die? When will I die?**

To answer these questions, it can help to explain that all living things die, that this is part of the cycle of life. As living things, people will also die. You can reassure them that most people are very old when they die. It may help to remind them of all the people they have in their lives and to think about all the things they wish to achieve in their lives, places they might like to visit, jobs they might want to do, their hopes and dreams.

### **What happens when you die? Where do you go to when you die?**

It can help to start with a simple biological explanation of death; the heart stops beating, the person stops breathing and their brain stops working. Younger children might like to feel their breath going in and out and their heart beating to help with their understanding. It can also be helpful to refer to the body as being a bit like an empty shell. Some young people want to know what happens to the body, for example between death and a funeral. This might naturally lead to a discussion about beliefs, ceremonies or rituals.

You might say, "Some people believe... and others think ...", or that you are not sure what happens when someone dies. It can be a good opportunity to ask them what they think and have a discussion with them.

### **"Can we stop people from dying?"**

It is important to remind them that people die because we are living things, just like plants and animals. For younger children, it might help to talk about most people being old and their bodies being worn out, but younger people may die if they have an illness or serious injuries which cannot be cured.

For older children, it can be helpful to discuss how we cannot change the fact that someone has died but we might consider what we can learn about improving treatments or safety guidance to help others in the future.

Encourage young people to consider what sort of things help them to live healthy lives – such as eating well, keeping safe and looking after themselves and others. Explain that medicines and treatments for illnesses and accidents are always being improved and people today live longer and healthier lives than they did in the past.

### **"Why are you crying?"**

If you experience an emotional reaction when talking about death with a child or young person, it is best to acknowledge your feelings while reassuring them that you will be OK in a moment. You might tell them that you also find talking about it difficult, or that you also feel sad. This will help them to know that it is OK to express their own feelings.