

Preparing for the Death of a Loved One

PLANNING FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN



Wonders & Worries

Professional support for children through a parent's illness.

We will, together.

Preparing for the death of a loved one is tough, many parents wonder if, when, and how to tell their children. Talking to children about what is to come allows children to not feel left out and gives them time to start processing their emotions. Shifting the focus from “we hope your loved one will get better” to “your loved one is not expected to get better” is difficult. Taking time to have this hard conversation benefits children long term as it builds trust and helps them not feel alone.

Be clear and concise. Provide honest language that promotes the idea that death is final. Use the words “death, will die, or dead” and avoid euphemisms like “they will go away, passed away, or will be in a better place.”

Speak to your child in a private, comfortable space. Meet in a space where everyone can express emotions. Some children will cry or be upset; others will not say much or seem unaffected. If you have more than one child, think about whether it would be better to talk to your children together or individually. Avoid talking immediately before significant transitions, e.g., going to school or bedtime.

Keep things simple. When preparing for a death, plan to cover the following topics:

Find out what your child knows about death. Children may have experienced the death of a pet or heard of

a friend’s grandparent dying. It is common for children to have misconceptions or magical thinking and not understand that death is final.

Tell your story. Explain that the doctors tried very hard to help with medicine and treatments, but they are not working anymore. We do not know when, but my body/your loved one’s body will start to shut down. At some point my body/their body will not work anymore and I will/your loved one will die.

Explain death in child-friendly terms. When a person dies, the body stops doing its job. The heart no longer beats, lungs do not breathe in air, and a person no longer feels, sees, smells, eats, or thinks anymore. Focus on what is happening now. Explain what the child might see with symptoms and physical changes. If the loved one stays in the hospital, help create a plan for communication and visitation. If the loved one is coming home on hospice care, explain this is when medical staff come into the home to care for your loved one and help them stay comfortable.

Discuss changes your child will experience. Talk with children about changes in routine and changes with who might be caring for them. Children may need time to process this news and need to leave the room to play or have space for big emotions. A key piece of information is to let them know “they will be taken care of” and will not be left alone.

Activity Idea

Create a Handprint Keepsake: This piece of art will allow children to connect with their loved one and create a lasting memory. Take a blank canvas or a piece of poster board and have your child trace their hand, along with other family member’s hands. Encourage decorating the handprints with markers or paint for personalization. Lastly, have each family member think of positive word descriptors or favorite things about that person and write them along the fingers.

Preparing for the Death of a Loved One

FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

As you plan to talk with your child, here are some examples and conversation starters.

Tell your story.

"I tried everything that doctors wanted me to, or I worked really hard and so did my medical team/doctor, but my body is not responding to the treatments anymore. We are not able to make the illness go away, and it will make my body start to shut down. This means my body will stop working and I will die. I won't be able to see, smell, hear, or move anymore." "We don't know exactly what day or time this will happen, but we believe it could happen in the next days/weeks/months (state the expected timeline)."

Find out what your child knows about death.

*"What do you think happens when a person dies?"
"What happens to a person's body after they die?"*

Talk about the plan for care.

"I am going to come home on hospice care. This means nurses will visit to make sure I am comfortable at home. They will be bringing a hospital bed to the house so I can sleep better along with other medical supplies." Or, "I am going to

stay in the hospital so they can monitor me here and I won't be coming home." "If you want, you can Facetime with me if I feel up to it or visit when possible if it's allowed." "Maybe you can draw pictures for me or write me notes. Do you have any ideas?"

Focus on what is happening now.

"Right now, I feel weaker than normal. You might notice me not eating food and that is okay. My body doesn't need it anymore." "You might see me sleeping a lot or needing to close my eyes. You can still come to my bedside and talk to me. I might not talk back but I can still hear you and would love for you to come say hello or goodnight to me."

Discuss changes your child will experience.

"We will have a lot of helpers coming in and out of the house. We are going to do our best to make sure you still have time with friends, and we might be asking other caregivers to help drive you places." "I might not be able to tuck you into bed, but would you like to pick out your favorite story and I can record myself reading it to you?" "Do you have ideas about how we could spend time together?"

Loved One in Hospice Care

Have a set time of the day when visitors are no longer allowed to give consistency for family time together. Designate a space for children to be alone/take breaks.

If friends/family want to drop off meals, place an ice chest on your porch to limit disturbance.

Create a plan together. If children aren't home or are asleep when the loved one dies, talk about a plan to say goodbye before the body is taken from the home. Offer choices and give children an opportunity for input.

Loved One in another Place

Think about how your child can stay connected with their loved one during distance, eg. use a notebook to write notes to pass back and forth, Facetime, text or create crafts for loved one's room.

If children are able to visit, prepare them for what they will see and hear. Let them know what they can touch and suggest things they can do. Take a picture and prepare children before entering the room.

Explain that their loved one isn't alone. people are taking care of them. Provide information about what their loved is doing such as they are listening to music or are sleeping a lot.