

Tips for Speaking to Children About Serious Illness

Death has invaded the life of a child you love, and the child must deal with the pain to move on.

It may feel difficult to talk to a child about death or serious illness. However, not doing so leads to even more difficulty for the child. To help a child not feel isolated, be honest and clear with them.

Despite what we think, children are capable of coping with this harsh reality. If they learn to be afraid of death, it is because that is what we have taught them.

If we try to protect children, to spare them from pain, we risk weakening their ability to cope and thereby causing them more pain in the future.

You can help your child and yourself to manage your grief by strengthening your relationship through mutual sharing and honest communication.

Shame is more predominant in children where parent's death is "mysterious" or unprepared for.

Young children need to understand that death means the body stops working – the eyes can't see, ears can't hear, the muscles don't work so the person can't move or eat.

They need to know that every living thing has a beginning and an end and that the time in between is long for some and short for others.

When a parent has a terminal illness, explain it in simple straightforward terms.

- "Daddy has a sickness called cancer. He is going to be in the hospital for a long time so the doctors can give him medicine and try to make the sickness go away."
- "Your mom has a sickness called cancer. There are many kinds of cancer. This one is different than what grandpa had. I will tell you what I know about your mom's cancer."
- "If you have any questions about what is happening, ask me and I will tell you the truth."
- "Your daddy's heart was not working right and couldn't pump enough blood through his body."

Children know intuitively when something is wrong if not told the truth, they imagine much worse.

- Talk honestly and simply, only give specific details they ask for.
- Don't make them worry alone.

- Children as young as three are aware of a terminal prognosis even without an adult telling them.

Use correct words to describe the diagnosis or illness.

- For example, say “cancer” not the lump or “boo boo.”
- Say “died” not asleep or “passed away” or “with God.”

Adults lose credibility when children eventually learn the truth from other family members, at school, or over- hear conversations.

Children are naturally egocentric. If they are not told why someone died, they will naturally blame themselves.

- “I got dad upset because I got in trouble at school.”
- “If only I had not argued with mom she wouldn’t have had the heart attack.”

Information provided by Hospice of Santa Barbara.