



## PARENTING ED |

# TALKING TO TODDLERS ABOUT DEATH & GRIEF

### **CONTENT WARNING:**

The information contained in this document contains references to death and dying and certain content may be especially difficult for some caregivers. Please pay close attention to your own feelings as you read and share this information.

Death is one of the hardest subjects to talk about with young children, especially when you're struggling to deal with your own sorrow. However, death is an inescapable part of life; children will need your help to understand it.

Though it is a natural part of life, many adults are nervous about discussing this "taboo topic" with very young children for fear of saying the wrong thing, their own lack of comfort related to the topic, or because children "are too young to understand." Children are curious about life and death, and refer to and notice death in people, plants, and animals. Consider that talking about death does not *create* sadness, it provides space for expression of feelings that are *already present*.

### **How to Explain Death to Your Toddler**

#### **Answer Their Questions**

It's normal for your toddler to be curious about death. Do your best to answer their questions in as simple and straightforward a manner as possible. "They were very sick, and their body stopped working" is a very simple way to describe death to a small child. Questions like, "When will *you* die?" Should be treated as typical, as young children process big concepts through their own lens. What your toddler may really mean is, "Will I still be taken care of?" and it is our duty to discern what they may be asking or worrying about and answer that to the best of our ability.

#### **Give Brief, Honest, Accurate & Simple Answers**

For big concepts like grief, brevity is important. It is most helpful to explain death in terms of physical functions that have ceased, rather than launching into a complicated discussion of a particular illness or event. For a toddler you could say, "Now that Uncle John has died, his body has stopped working." For a preschooler you could expand to include and relate to them, "He can't walk or run, or eat or sleep or see anymore, and he doesn't feel any pain."

#### **Avoid Euphemisms**

Common adult phrases for death like, "passed away, resting in peace, put to sleep" can be confusing for a young child. Your toddler may worry that going to bed at night means they will die, too. Instead practice using the words: dead, death, dying with the concept of the "body stop working." State the reasons for the death as simply as possible: "Grandpa was very, very old and his body couldn't work anymore." If Grandpa was sick before he died, be sure to reassure your child that if they get sick from a cold or flu, it doesn't mean they will die. Explain that there are different ways people get sick, and that we recover from minor illnesses like the ones your child usually has.

### Model More Helpful Language

Common language to reconsider	Why it should be reconsidered	New language to practice
Referring to everyday items that we recharge as dead or dying.	When our car/phone dies, we can recharge it, and it is fine the next day unlike those who have died.	My phone is out of battery. I need to recharge my phone.
Referring to someone who has died as lost.	We lose our keys; that does not mean they are gone forever or dead.	Replace with the framework of the body no longer working.
Referring to sleeping or eternal rest.	We help our children go to sleep as a daily routine and any sleep/rest language can be deeply confusing.	Replace with the framework of the body no longer working or dying.
Referring to someone having "gone to a better place."	This language diminishes the feelings of grief and the impact that the deceased had on the living.	I will cherish the memories we shared.
Referring to someone having "fought cancer" or "lost their battle with cancer."	In a battle there are winners and losers, but there is no outside enemy when a body stops working.	They died of cancer. Consider the idea of an advocate rather than a fighter.

### Expect the Subject to Come up Repeatedly

Be ready to field the same questions from your child over and over again. Understanding the permanence of death is a large concept for a toddler. Expect new questions as their awareness of death and their cognitive skills grow. Your child's ongoing questions are typical, and not a sign of a behavior to correct. Just keep answering them as patiently as you can.

### Be an Emotional Role Model

Grieving is an important part of healing for both children and adults. As they process their grief by asking repeated questions, you may have to face your own emotions in their presence. Do your best not to frighten your child with excessive grief. Explain that grownups need to cry sometimes, too, and that you feel sad because you miss them too. Your toddler is keenly aware of changes in your mood, and your modelling of healthy emotional expression is helpful to them. Part of being your child's emotional role model is teaching Emotional Intelligence and building the vocabulary needed to identify and describe different emotions through lots of little, short conversations.

### Be Prepared for a Variety of Reactions

Children not only feel sorrow over the death of a loved one, but they may also feel guilt or anger. Expect that they may have tantrums more often, either to manage their own sadness, or as a reaction to the tension and sadness in your household. Give yourself and them some grace to learn new ways to manage these new feelings and emotions.



### **Memorialize the Deceased**

Children need concrete ways to mourn the death of a loved one. Light a candle at home, sing a song, draw a picture, or take part in some other ritual observance of the person who died. Pictures can be a very helpful tool for your child to remember them, and to talk about their feelings. It also helps to talk about the good relationship she had with the person who died: “Remember that day when you and Grandma picked blueberries? She had so much fun with you.”

### **Do Your Best to Get Your Preschooler’s Life Back to Normal**

The sooner your toddler’s routine gets back to normal, the easier it will be for them. Build a predictable and caring environment for them to practice all of these newfound emotionally intelligent skills they are working through.

### **Get Help**

If your toddler seems to be having an especially difficult time coping, if they become terrified of going to sleep, or seem depressed, talk to your healthcare provider about professional counseling. Also, see the reference section for local groups built to support families of young children with grief.

## **Sensitive Topics for Caregivers of Young Children**

### **Miscarriage**

If you and your partner have experienced a miscarriage, you’ll undoubtedly grieve. But you may be surprised to discover that your toddler is also grieving, even if their understanding of the pregnancy was incomplete. Expect to have lots of conversations around death with your toddler, especially if you try for another baby. Explain that babies who miscarry are usually not healthy enough to live on their own outside their mommy. Let your child say goodbye by drawing a picture or making a special gift for the departed baby.

### **Death of a Pet**

When a pet dies, it is often a child’s first experience with death. Offer lots of sympathy for their loss and expect the same kinds of ongoing mourning and repeated questioning that you’d get if a person they cared for has died.

### **Resources**

- [Baby Center](#) Questions about death: What preschoolers ask, what parents answer
- [Discussing Death with Young Children](#)

Below are local organizations that provide extensive, comprehensive services for small children and their families as they work through grief.

- [Journey’s Program](#): Bereavement Program for Child Loss at Seattle Children’s
- [Safe Crossings Foundation Providence Hospital](#)
- [Mary Bridges Center for Grieving Children](#)