

Telling your child that someone is dying

There is no getting away from the fact that telling a child that someone is dying is an incredibly hard thing to do, made even tougher by the fact that you are still likely coming to terms with this too. However, trust that you will know when the best time is to tell them and the right way to do this. Below are some suggestions and approaches that may help you to manage this.



Am I protecting them by not telling them?

It is natural for this question to enter your head and it is easy to feel that sharing such sad news will only hurt the child more. However, children are naturally inquisitive and like sponges they absorb words and emotions that are around them. It is very likely that they are already aware that something is changing whether that be noticing a physical change in their loved one or a change in mood around the house.

By keeping the changes quiet and not discussing them may make the child feel scared or anxious, or that they aren't being included. By talking to your child honestly, factually and in a simple language that they can understand, it can enable your child to understand what is happening and feel able to talk to you if they need support.

Will they know what I mean by dying?

Lots of children will already have some concept of what the word dying means although this may depend on where they learnt it. Children may have read about it in stories, seen

something on TV or experienced a pet dying possibly. By using these examples and talking factually it can help your child to understand the true meaning of death and what this means. If you feel able to, you could ask them what they think the word might mean so that you can see what their understanding is. Some things you may say to help a young child to understand are below:

- When someone dies it means that their body doesn't work anymore.
- When someone dies, they are no longer breathing because their lungs have stopped working. Their heart no longer beats because that has stopped working too.
- When our body stops working it means that we can't do the things that we would normally do such as feel hot or cold, walk, talk, eat or feel pain.
- When someone dies it means that we won't be able to see them anymore.
- When someone dies it is forever and we are unable to change it.

By talking about death with your child it will allow them to feel that they can ask questions about what is happening. It will also open an opportunity to do special things with that loved one which they can treasure after the death. Sometimes, being excluded from the situation can bring about anger and frustration after the death that they weren't given a choice to say goodbye.

What is the right thing to say?

There is no "right" thing to say. What you say will be unique to you and your relationship with the child as well as your own feelings, the child's age and your family's beliefs. When you choose to have this conversation, try and ensure that it is at a time that is right for you both, for example, a time when you aren't rushing off to do something else, or a time when your child is tired and hungry and may be unable to hear what you are saying fully. Some ideas you may want to factor in are:

- Having someone there to support you – it may feel like a big responsibility to have the conversation alone and it is ok to feel that you would like support at this time. It may also give your child another person that they feel they can talk to about the situation if they need support in the future.
- Avoid using phrases like "gone to sleep", "slipped away" or "lost". Children often take things very literally and these phrases can cause confusion and upset. A young child may feel scared to go to sleep again in case they don't wake up, or may feel that if their loved one is lost then they could be found again.

It may feel harder to use factual words like “dead” or “dying” but these can help to ensure the child is clear about what is being said.

- It is likely that the conversation may bring up emotions for you too and that is natural. Try not to hide your emotions or feel that you must “be strong” but show them that it is ok to feel sad or angry about what is happening. This will help them to feel secure and acknowledge their feelings rather than keeping them trapped inside.
- Sometimes children may feel that it is their fault that this is happening or will want to change in order to make it go away e.g. “Is it because I told Daddy to go away the other day?” or “If I tell him I love him will he not die?” This is called bargaining. Reassure your child that it is not their fault and that this isn’t happening because of something they have or haven’t said or done.
- Don’t worry if your child seems unphased by the news you have just delivered. Children may need time to process what has been said and children can’t always focus on a topic for long periods of time. They may seem interested and listening one minute and run off to play football the next. Take it at their pace and don’t feel you need to rush it all into one conversation if it isn’t working.
- Encourage your child to ask questions to make sure that they understand. This will also help going forward when situations may change, and it is important they know that they can talk to you about this. Children may ask questions that seem strange to us and difficult to answer but it is important to offer the answers where you feel you can. For example, “What will Grandad look like when he is dead?” or “Can I have Grandad’s train set when he has died?” Don’t feel that you have to know the answers to everything that is asked but try to be honest. Acknowledge the question and answer it as best as you can so that the child feels they have been heard.
- Try not to promise things that aren’t possible. If you are hurting, it may feel easier to say something that you feel makes your child feel better, for example “Of course I will be here for your birthday” or “Nanny will get better”. We are unable to take away the pain for a child at this time but what we can offer is someone that they know they can trust and is telling them the truth. This will be invaluable after the death and they will feel heard and supported by you at this difficult time.
- Understand that you may have to say the same thing several times in order for it to sink in. Children will often ask questions a few times to clarify their own understanding or simply because they have forgotten everything that was said the first time. By repeating the same answers each time, it will help them to understand the facts.
- Be kind to yourself. You are likely worried about how your child may take the news but remember to look after yourself too.

What else can I do once my child knows that their loved one is dying?

Once your child is aware and understands a little more about death, it may be a good time to begin some memory making activities. These can be age appropriate activities that involve your child and the loved one.

It could be that a child would like to do a handprint painting with their loved one or create a memory box where they can hold photographs or special items that belong to their loved one. You may wish to have some special days out if you are able to in order to create memories together. An older child may wish to write a letter which can be given to the loved one if they are finding it too difficult to talk about.

It may also be helpful to inform your child's school in case their behaviour changes whilst they are there. It may help them to know that support is available at school as well as at home. It will also help the teachers and support staff at school to have a context to the behaviour that may be displayed there.

If you feel like you or a child needs support, then you may also find it helpful to read stories with them which may help them to understand. Please see the book list attached which details some suggestions you may like to try. You may also find it helpful to visit the following websites which may provide you with further information:

- www.winstonswish.org
- www.cruse.org.uk
- www.childbereavementuk.org
- www.autism.org.uk
- www.youngminds.org.uk
- www.themix.org.uk
- www.seesaw.org.uk

If you would like support with telling your child, or you feel that your child needs support then you can contact the Wellbeing Team on wellbeing@havenshospices.org.uk or 01702 220321.