

BARE.

Communication tips for caregivers.

Talking about death is often complicated, and speaking clearly doesn't come naturally to most adults. Words like 'dead' and 'died' are rephrased as 'passed' or 'no longer with us'.

When it comes to talking to children, this tendency can be amplified. However research tells us that this tendency to shield children may be counterproductive, and talking in code and metaphor about death can often serve only to confuse.

The Communication Tips for Caregivers guide includes recommendations for how to talk to children about the death of a loved one.



Important disclaimer

This worksheet is not a substitute for professional medical or psychological help. If a child you support is struggling with their grief and/or have concerns about their mental health please seek support from a professional.

For 24/7 crisis support, you can visit lifeline.org.au or call 13 11 14.



Communication tips.

As adults we've been conditioned to speak about death through code and euphemisms. 'Passed on' replaces 'died', someone is 'at rest' instead of 'dead'.

Children however have not yet learned this code. When we avoid speaking openly and honestly with kids about death, the gaps in knowledge are filled with their own theories and ideas, many of which are worse than reality.

Use this handout as a guide for speaking with your child about death and helping them cope. Consider their age, developmental level, and needs as you approach this topic.

Talking to children about death.



Avoid euphemisms. Kids may misunderstand phrases such as 'we lost her' or 'he passed'. They may want to search for someone who is 'lost' and expect someone who is 'gone' to return. Instead, state clearly that someone has died.

Be open to conversation. Conversations about death might seem taboo, but they don't have to be. Bringing up the topic of death, and allowing kids to do the same, gives them permission to ask questions and express their feelings. With this said, don't force conversation if they are not ready.

Teach children about death. Many kids don't understand that death is permanent. They might wonder how those who have died will eat or if they feel pain. Explain that when a person dies, that their body stops working and they no longer need to do these things. Children may need reminders that the person will not return.

Make it clear that kids are not at fault. Children may believe that something they did or said caused the person to die. Reinforce the act that thoughts, words and misbehaviour do not kill people.

Reassure children they are safe. After a death - especially that of a caregiver - many kids become concerned about their own and their family's safety. Reassure children they are safe and will always be cared for by an adult.

Give accurate information about how a person has died. Explain what has happened very simply, while omitting details that are frightening or traumatic. For example 'they died because they were very sick' or 'they died in a car accident'. Without information children will instead make up their own version of events.

Caring for children after death.



Give choices. When a death creates chaos, having choices can restore a child's sense of control. For example, let your child choose how to participate or help them plan the memorial service.

Maintain normalcy where possible. Losing a loved one can throw life into disarray, but children thrive on structure and predictability. Strive to keep regular routines wherever possible, such as bedtime, mealtimes and daily activities.

Empathise with your child's grief. There is no right or wrong way to feel after a death. It's okay for kids to be very emotional, or instead, not emotional at all. No one should be shamed for how they feel.

Use activities and rituals to remember the person who died. This could mean cooking their persons' favourite meal, writing in a journal or visiting their favourite location. Doing so will help the child continue to think about and feel connected to the deceased.

Practice self care. Your own ability to cope after a death will impact your child's ability to cope. It's important that you care for your own physical and mental wellbeing.