



## Talking with children and young people when someone has died

When someone dies, our natural instinct is often to protect our children and this means that we might find it difficult to talk to them about what has happened.

We see that with the right support, children are able to cope with - and process - even the most difficult information about death and dying. We also know that where they are given little or no information, their imagination can fill the gaps, often with inaccurate and confusing thoughts about what is happening.

### **Telling children that someone has died**

This can feel really difficult but children need to be told as soon as possible. It is best for children to be given difficult news by a close member of the family but if it feels too hard for you to do yourself, choose a trusted adult who the child knows well to break the news with you there to offer comfort and reassurance.

Where possible, choose a quiet and comfortable location where you know you won't be disturbed and allow plenty of time for the child to talk to you or ask any questions they may have. Let them know that they can ask you any questions they like or talk to you about how they feel. They need to know that nothing is too bad that it can't be spoken about.

### **Be honest**

It is important to be honest, even when the news is hard to hear, as it can be very confusing for a child to be told something they later find to be untrue. You may want to begin by saying something like "I have something very sad to tell you..."

### **Use simple language**

Think about your child's age and level of understanding and, where possible, choose words they already know and stick to concepts that they can understand. Start simply by telling the child that the person has died. This may be enough at first.

### **Give information in small chunks**

Give information in small chunks and follow your child's lead on sharing more information. If they ask a question, they are probably ready, or they need, the answer. So again, simply reply to their question.

Avoid giving too much detail or information. This can be added later when the child is ready. And don't be afraid to say "I don't know the answer to that" if they ask questions you cannot answer.





### **Euphemisms and metaphors**

Avoid using metaphors or euphemisms such as 'lost', 'passed', or 'gone to sleep'. We may feel this softens the message or is somehow kinder to our child, but instead it can cause bigger worries and confusion for them.

### **On Repeat**

Be prepared for repetition, both in your child's questions and the answers you provide. This is how your child will process what is happening and not a signal that there is a problem or they have forgotten. Children may need to hear the information over and over before they are able to understand and begin to process it.

### **Consistency**

It is important that all family members and your support network - including school staff - use the same language to talk about what has happened. Different explanations and language can cause additional confusion and worry for your child at a time when they are already trying to make sense of what has happened.

### **Check understanding**

Make sure you check that your child has understood what they have been told. Asking them what they think or what they know about what has happened is a good way of checking what they have understood.

For further guidance and advice in supporting bereaved children and young people,  
please visit our website: [www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

