

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE DEATH OF A PARENT

This guide supports caregivers to have challenging conversations such as the death of a parent with children in a trauma informed and structured way. This guide provides a scaffold with tips, do's and don'ts when talking about the death of a parent with a child, and how to support the child's wellbeing in line with their age and stage of development.

Do:

Tell them the truth: It can be tempting to avoid the truth when talking to children about death, especially young children. We often want to protect children by telling them things such as "daddy has gone for a big holiday" hoping that time will allow them to forget, or "mummy is sleeping".

However, not telling a child the truth will only confuse them and cause them emotional pain down the track.

Validate their feelings: Create a safe space for the child to express their feeling. Often young children can't articulate their feelings through words and instead may be expressed through anger or tantrums.

Be there to support them through these hard feelings. It is also important to allow older children to grieve by allowing them space to process their thoughts within a safe environment. Check-in on them with open questions such as "What are you feeling?" instead of "How are you feeling?"

Allow the child to participate: It is important to allow the child to participate in death rituals as part of their grieving.

Some people don't bring their child to the funeral to avoid upsetting the child, however, it is important to welcome them so they can understand the process. It also encourages them to feel included by letting them choose a song, photo, or say a reading.

Don't:

Hide the grief: Showing yourself grieving to your child, allows the child to know that grieving is normal.

It will also encourage your child to be open with you about their grieving especially if they are a teenager.

Pressure the child: It is important to not pressure your child to express what they are feeling. Allow them to open when they are ready.

Overshare: Avoid oversharing information surrounding the death. Be truthful about what happened by allowing the child to ask questions in their own time.

Share information in doses to know how much the child can handle at a time.



FAMILIES OF VETERANS GUILD

When and where should I have this conversation?

It is often best to tell the child as soon as possible about the death of their parent, to avoid them hearing about it from someone else or wondering what is going on.

It is important to read the child's emotional state before sharing to ensure you have their attention and to create the calmest space possible. It is important to share the death of the parent with the child when they are in a private, safe space where they are comfortable expressing their feelings.

Consider the age of the child

Infant- 2 years: At this age children can feel emotions but can't express them. Keep them in their normalised routine. As time passes, they will find out about the death as they will no longer remember the parent and questions may arise in later years. At this stage, a photo album with memories of the child and parent could support the child with knowing they were loved by the parent in years to come.

2- 4 years: At this age is common for a child to think of death as not being permanent and may expect the deceased parent to come back. It is important to be clear with the child about the facts. Use factual words such as "death" or "died" (other terms can be confusing). Remind the child the parent is not coming back. Validate the child's feelings and emotional response. Children this age may also express their understanding of death through play or art.

5- 8 years: At this age, children might start to understand that death is more permanent. Again, it is important to use concrete language to avoid confusion. It is likely at this age for the child to ask the same question multiple times. Age- appropriate books are also a useful resource for children this age as they are often visual learners and pictures may help them to understand the concept.

9-12 years: At this age children don't only understand that death is permanent, but they can comprehend how this will negatively impact their lives. When communicating with a child this age is important to answer questions truthfully using the correct terminology. It's important to listen and validate the child's feelings.

13- 18 years: At this age, children are most likely to fully understand the concepts of death. They may also have thoughts about concepts such as after the afterlife. Children this age can grieve by distancing themselves from family members and instead turn to friends for support or undertake unsafe behaviours such as drugs and alcohol. Self-harm and suicide are another aspect that needs to be considered as a grieving coping mechanism within this age group. Adapt the family's routine to allow grief, answer questions honestly, and don't offer them advice unless they ask, instead offer them choices to make their life more comfortable.

Child and Family Resilience Programs:

ecdefenceprograms.com

National Centre for Childhood Grief:

childhoodgrief.org.au