

How to Talk with Children About Death

What is death? What does it look like for youth and young adolescents? How do we prepare ourselves in order to support youth? These are big questions that require more than a tip sheet to fully answer, but we hope to provide a starting point for anyone caring for a grieving child.

We define grief from a death as all the thoughts, feelings and behaviors that we experience after someone dies. For youth and young adolescents, grief will look differently depending on their developmental stage and age as well as their relationship with the person who died.

As children move through infancy to adulthood, their brains go through extraordinary changes. At each stage of development, they mature physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually and in their use of language. Being conscious and mindful of a child's stage of development can help caregivers, professionals, teachers, and other adults who care for children to:

- Talk with them about death.
- Understand their reactions to grief and loss.
- Support them through this difficult time.
- Help them name what they may be experiencing emotionally and physically.

Keep in mind that even within these stages, each child is unique and is their own person. Whatever a child's age and stage, environment and history can affect their level of understanding. A child or teen who previously experienced the death of a loved one or a cherished pet may require different support than a child experiencing grief for the first time. Stages can also overlap and children can regress for various reasons.



Infants and Toddlers 0-2 Years)

While infants and toddlers probably do not understand that someone is dying or has died, they are acutely sensitive to any change or disruption in their environment and routine.

Very young children are intensely aware of anything that affects their security, physical and emotional needs, including a caregiver's absence.

Infants and toddlers feel comforted and secure when normal routines are continued as much as is possible and when they are cared for with sensitivity.

Although they probably have few or no memories of the person who has died, a bond can be nurtured as infants and toddlers age and grow by:

- telling stories about the person.
- sharing photos or videos of them.
- describing the relationship that the child was too young to remember.

Some ways to nurture a bond for very young children:

"Did you know Grandma used to love to bake?"

"You have the same smile as your mom."

"Your sister loved to tickle your toes when you were a baby."

Pre-School Aged Children (2-4 Years)

Children at this age can identify people who are special to their family, and they continue to be sensitive to changes in their caregivers, routines, and environments.

They start to understand death, but they do not fully understand that death is permanent.

Pre-schoolers learn about their world through everyday events and storytelling.



Pre-School Aged Children (2-4 Years, continued)

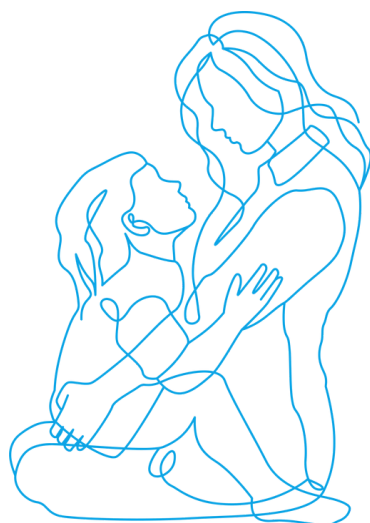
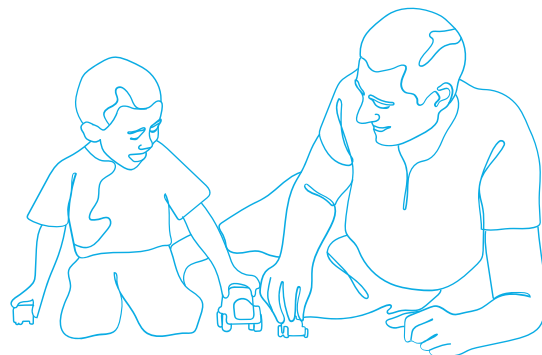
Pre-schoolers can be taught to understand what's happening when a family member's illness and dying is explained using simple, but honest, concrete language (dead, died, death) instead of "went to sleep" or "went to a better place."

It is helpful to repeat this information frequently so young children can hold on to this new knowledge.

It is normal for pre-school aged children to continue asking where the person who died went.

They begin to experience and learn about a wider range of feelings for which caregivers can provide guidance and soothing.

Children in this stage may use play to work through their experience of death and loss.



Young Children (5-9 Years)

At this stage, children are still learning abstract ideas of space and time. Even adults can have difficulty understanding "forever," or that a loved one is "gone" when they die.

Younger children need help understanding why someone has died, and that "death" means the body stops working. For example, caregivers should explain that the person no longer needs to eat, that their heart stopped working, and that they stopped breathing.

The explanations must be repeated often before children at this stage understand that death happens to all living things and is irreversible.

This can be frightening and overwhelming information for children, as they start to realize everyone dies and that life is fragile and insecure.

Depending on their life experience of death and dying, this understanding comes at different ages for different children.

Older Children and Teenagers (10-18 Years)

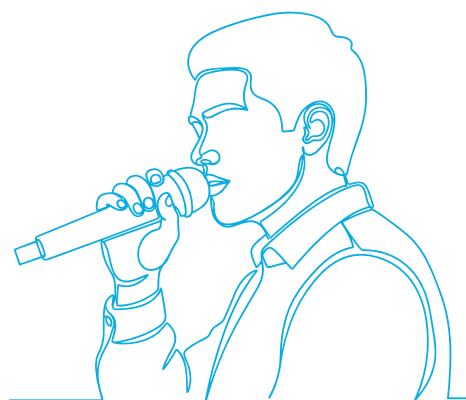
A key stage of teenage development is a move toward independence from their caregivers.

Peer friendships are often the main source of support and connection for older children and teens. A peer death can be very impactful for a young person, even if their family members did not know the friend.

Teens may prefer to explore their feelings and find formal support outside the home.

Peer group grief programs are of particular benefit to this age group.

Memorials and rituals are very important. Older children and teens may create social media tributes, wear jewelry or clothing in memory of their person, or create art and music of the person.



Grief is a personal journey that lasts a lifetime. Children can experience their grief in new ways as they reach stages of development. Keep in mind that grief experiences can be triggered when children begin to understand new concepts like the finality of death or when they are reach milestones such as graduation, moving through puberty, dating, or achieving something they worked hard to achieve.

Supporting a child through loss is ongoing. It requires many conversations and exploration of new ideas and feelings over time, and may include asking for support along the way from professionals.

Ways to Show Support:

- Invite children and teens to continue sharing their thoughts, feelings and questions with you about death and the person who died.
- Check in with them regularly; be sure to support and validate whatever they are feeling.
- Know that it is okay to show your feelings with your child as well. Children look to adults as models as to how they can grieve in a healthy way.
- Be proactive in acknowledging the death, especially with special occasions or holidays.
- Children and teens alike benefit from a diverse network of support as they process their grief at each stage, and as their connection to the person who has died evolves over time.
- Help children and teens build connections with their peers and adults with whom they feel comfortable and safe to express their thoughts and emotions.
- Connect them with other bereaved children and youth so they know they are not alone. This may be in a grief support group, a camp for grieving kids, or an online group.

Recommended Books

Uplift Center for Grieving Children has curated a list of age-appropriate book recommendations that can help adults when talking about death with children and teens. Scan the QR code to view the list, or visit upliftphilly.org/programs/uplift-resources/book-recommendations/



Learn more about Uplift's services

Uplift's **Philly HopeLine** is a free, confidential helpline staffed by our Master's level clinicians. The Philly HopeLine is open to all youth and caregivers in the Philadelphia region. Call if you'd like to sign up for grief groups, receive emotional or grief support, identify community resources, or get on the list for an in-school grief group. Interpretation service is available for more than 100 languages. Dial **833-PHL-HOPE (833-745-4673)** to speak to an Uplift clinician, or email PHLHope@UpliftPhilly.org.

A tip sheet from

Uplift Center for Grieving Children

Office: 267-437-3123

Philly HopeLine: 833-745-4673

www.UpliftPhilly.org

    @upliftcenter