TOM'S TRUST
for children with brain tumours

Six things to remember when talking to children about death and dying

Our Director of Services Development, and clinical psychologist, Dr Lynda Teape offers guidance on how to talk to a child after the death of a loved one.

1. Keep talking

It can be difficult to know where to start and what language to use. You may have never had to talk to a child about death before and feel completely lost. You may want to avoid talking about it at all, which is very normal, as it will likely bring up lots of difficult feelings for you. You may want to protect the child from also having those feelings, which is understandable.

Children are very sensitive and no matter how hard you try to protect them; they will know something has changed and may start to worry about it. If you avoid it, they may learn that it is not okay to talk, avoid asking the questions they want to or seeking the support they need. Children have amazing imaginations and without adults to guide them, may create all kinds of fantasies in their head which could be much scarier than the reality.

2. Use clear and honest terms

It is far better that they hear the facts, gently delivered by you, than to overhear a conversation you're having with another adult or from a friend in the playground. Be prepared for what you want to say whilst also ready to face the unexpected. No matter how much you plan, children will inevitably surprise us. It is okay to be led by the child and don't worry if you didn't say everything you wanted to. This is not a one-off conversation, and their thoughts and questions will evolve over time.

Choose your words carefully. It is natural to want to soften your language, with terms like 'lost, passed over, gone to Heaven' but these can be easily misunderstood by children and create more questions and worries. If they're lost, can we go look for them? If I get lost, does that mean I won't ever come back? It is better to use the words 'death, dead and dying'. These can be tricky concepts for younger children to understand and may be an evolving conversation you have with them, many times over and for a long time, sometimes years.

3. Adapt your language for their age

Be honest and factual in an age-appropriate way. Don't worry if they don't react in the way you expect. You may not be able to hold younger children's attention for long, so it may need to be a conversation that happens in small pieces. Younger children may also show distress in a more behavioural way, such as being more boisterous or clingy. This is quite normal. Older children may be better able to express how it makes them feel and may want support from you or their peers. Be available to them for support and to answer questions as and when they're ready; be led by them.

4. Be ready to listen and observe

Children may hold certain assumptions or have the most amazing questions that would never have occurred to us. Allow the space and silences for those questions to be formed and asked. It is very common for children to begin to worry about death and whether they or loved ones might die next. Look out for this, so you can reassure them.

5. Don't be afraid to cry with them

Many adults are concerned about this, but you will not do any harm by crying with them or in front of them. It may be a wonderful way of normalising emotional expression, of showing how you regulate your own emotions or how you can talk to and comfort someone else, who is sad. This in turn will show them that they are allowed to cry, can learn to soothe themselves and seek comfort from others. It may be helpful to be aware though of how your child responds to you crying, in case they feel worried or want to care for you so that you can give reassurance.

6. Make space for rituals and remembrance

In all cultures and religions, death is surrounded by important rituals and children can benefit from being involved in these too. Maybe they want to collect pictures of their sibling; light a candle or plant a tree with you. You may want to spend time talking about their sibling and sharing your memories of them. You may have religious or spiritual beliefs that will inform these rituals and how you want to guide your child.