



The Irish Childhood
Bereavement Network

Factsheet: Supporting a child at the time of death

At the time of death

When a person has died, sensitive communication with children is vital and it can help them to spend some time with the person's body. Although it is thought that this might be upsetting for them, with careful preparation it can actually help them to understand what has happened. These guidelines may help:

Telling children that someone close has died:

- The person closest to the child should tell them about the death as soon as possible. If the death takes place during the night, it is better to wait until the morning when the child wakes up naturally.
- The words used will depend on the age of the child but it is important to use clear words such as dead or died. It is not helpful to use terms such as 'gone' or 'gone to sleep' as these confuse and frighten children.
- It is important to explain what being dead means as children don't know this. In this way, you are helping the child to understand that now that the person has died their body has stopped working and that sadly they cannot come back again.
- Younger children, do not understand that death is permanent and may expect the person to return from Heaven. We can gently support them in learning that the person can't come back because their body has stopped working.
- Telling children that a person has gone to Heaven may be comforting for them. For some children, however, this can be confusing, especially for younger children as they don't understand Heaven. They may think it is another place where people go on a journey and they may want to go there too.
- It is really important to talk to children, to tell them what has happened. This will help them cope with the changes that are taking place. If we do not tell them the truth, appropriate to their age, they may feel alone and confused and there is a chance they could hear it from other children which can be very hurtful.
- Use play or drawing to help children's understanding of death. Often the visual speaks louder than words to a child.

Viewing the body:

- If the person has died in hospital, tell the staff if you are bringing children in to view the body. The staff may help to make the room a little more comfortable and inviting for children.
- There is no definite advice that it is always right for a child to see the person's body. This may depend on how the person died for example and also the age of the child. If the person's body has significant injuries, it would probably not be helpful for the child to see them in this way.
- Telling children what to expect when they see the body will help them to decide if they want to do this or not. You might tell them that the person is no longer able to talk or to breathe and

that their body will feel cold and look pale and like wax. If children are old enough the decision about seeing the body can be shared with them.

- If they decide to see the person who has died, they will need support from a trusted adult. If possible make this time private for children. Allow the child to tell you when they have had enough time and want to leave.
- It is important for children to feel that they have said what they need to say to the person who has died so they can be encouraged to talk to them. This is part of saying goodbye for children. Finding the words may be difficult. They may want to leave a note, a drawing or a small memento with the person in the coffin.
- If children are not given the chance to say goodbye in their own way, they may regret this later.
- Holding onto the deceased's possessions can help children to feel close to them. These link objects help them continue their bond with the deceased.

Answering children's questions:

- Older children (around 8 years) may be very interested in factual information about the death and what has happened to the body. These may be difficult questions for adults to hear and answer. Our pdf on Talking to children about cremation and funerals may be helpful

For further information see: www.childhoodbereavement.ie

Supported by



Irish Hospice Foundation, 32
Nassau St (4th Fl.), Dublin D02
YE06 E:

Claire.Banks@hospicefoundation.

ie