

Let's talk about...

U.S. News
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Conversations with Children about Death and Dying

Talking with children about death can be hard. Whether these conversations happen at home or in the hospital, before or after a death, it is important to be open, honest, and as clear as possible.

Some tips to keep in mind:

- First, find out what your child already knows about the situation. Often, they know more than we think. For example, "Can you tell me why [that person] needed to go to the hospital?"
 - Read a children's book about death, this can be helpful as a conversation starter.
 - Use clear and simple words like "die," "dying," and "dead," instead of phrases such as "went to sleep," "passed away," or "we lost her/him." Phrases like these are not clear and can cause children to misunderstand the situation.
 - Explain that the body has "stopped working," and is "no longer able to do the things it used to, like "breathe, eat, and talk."
 - Let the child know that the nurses and doctors did their best to take care of their loved one. You can explain that their loved one "was hurt very badly, and medicines, machines and surgery could not help their body stay alive." As appropriate, you can say that "medicine helped their body for a while but could not keep them alive."
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- It is okay for your child to see your emotions. By showing your emotions, you give your child permission to share their feelings openly as well.
 - Encourage your child to ask questions to help them understand. They may also express their understanding and feelings through activities like art, music, or play.
 - It is okay if you do not have all the answers. You can say, "I do not know the answer to that question right now, but if I do at some point, I'll let you know."
 - Use your support system. They are there for you. Whether it is family, hospital support staff, or outside resources, they want to help you through this difficult time.

For more information or to connect with a Child Life Specialist, please visit: <http://ucdavis.health/childlife>