New York Life Foundation



The power of parenting: helping children cope with the impending death of a loved one

Resilient Parenting

A PARTNER IN NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Both you and your child are likely to feel overwhelming anxiety if a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness and/or is seriously ill. This is absolutely normal. If the news comes that your loved one is likely to die, it is important to prepare your child. There are powerful steps you can take to ensure your child understands what is happening, has a chance to say good-bye to a loved one in their own way, and is comforted through this difficult time. This fact sheet contains some concrete suggestions on what to say and do to help children prepare for the death of a loved one.

Anticipating the death

Anticipatory grief is grief that begins as we await the death of a loved one. Different children in your family will experience such news in different ways. Anticipatory grief may include being worried about how much the child will miss the person, being worried that they won't be able live without the person, and/or being very preoccupied with how the death will happen (will it be painful, will the person suffer, etc).

"Papa, what if Aunt Lenore doesn't know I love her?" *—Jaelyn, age 7*

"I can't stop thinking that Bibi is hurting. She can't tell us if she's in pain. She must be so scared. I need to get to her."
—Kamaria, age 14

CAREGIVER RESPONSE:

- Detail with your child all the ways they can continue to feel connected to their loved one, even after the loved one has died (e.g., doing things the child used to enjoy doing together with the loved one). Encourage your child to write a letter to the person saying all that needs to be said.
- Remind your child that you or other loved ones will continue to care for them.Your family will take care of each other and you will always be there for each other.
- Identify with your child all the things the child has in common with the person and how to carry on their legacy.
- Provide honest communication while also allowing your child to ask questions. It's best to allow your child to guide the conversation by asking, for example, "I know you may be worried about what it is like for Bibi in the hospital. What questions do you have for me?"

Preparing your child

If your child asks if their loved one is going to die or if it starts to become evident that a death is pending, be honest with your child about what you know and don't know. There is a fine line between being honest and yet not overwhelming your child with details. Provide simple and concrete information. Using terms like "getting worse" or "declining health" may be confusing, especially to young children. Teens will inevitably know more than you think they do. Be respectful of their need to know what's happening. Understand that children are processing the information you've shared and preparing for what is to come in their own way. Remember that it's not so much WHAT you say to your child, but more about being PRESENT and actively LISTENING. Showing empathy and acknowledging their fears and feelings can set the tone for how your family copes and bonds through this experience.

"Why does Mama need that breathing machine? Is she going to die?" *—Grace*

CAREGIVER RESPONSE:

- Define death and dying. Explain in as simple terms as possible for your child that death happens when the body (including the heart and brain) stops working. If you have a spiritual belief, explain your belief to the child about what would happen to your loved one's spirit. Try to avoid euphemisms though, like, "Dad is going to sleep forever", "Dad is gone" or "Dad is going to a better place."
- You may feel that you "must be strong" for your child. It is okay to admit to your child that you are worried and that you don't have all the answers. Share with your child that being angry, upset or crying is okay and that you may feel that way too. Being honest with your child and age-appropriate in your language is important.
- It is possible that your child will express feelings of guilt. This is normal, among both adults and children. Help your child understand that your loved one's sickness/illness was no one's fault. Reassure your child that you and the person who is ill loves them very much.
- Provide physical comfort to your child. Hold your child (even your big children may want to snuggle), hug your child, stay close to each other, including your teens if they would like.

To a 6-year old child whose mother is unlikely to recover:

"Grace, mama is very sick and may not get better. She wants to fight this illness, but her body may not be strong enough now. The doctors are doing all they can to help Mama but we need to prepare ourselves that she may die. Do you know what that word means?"

To an 11-year old child whose mother is unlikely to recover:

"Grace, Mom is very sick. Her lungs are doing the best they can to fight the illness but now she needs a machine to help her breathe. Sometimes when people are placed on breathing machines, they are never able to breathe on their own again. We don't know how Mom is going to respond yet. There is nothing we can do now but wait and see. I know this is very scary. I'm scared too. I hate that we can't see her and be with her but we can take care of each other right now. The doctors are doing everything they can to save Mom but she may not live. I will keep telling you everything I know about what is happening to Mom and being honest about it."

Saying good-bye

If you are provided an opportunity to say a final good-bye to your loved one (even if the person is unconscious), give your child the opportunity to be included in this experience if the child would like to do so. However, do not force your child to participate. Your connection during this difficult time gives them permission to share what they need to share and talk about their fears and questions as your loss of a loved one occurs. Parents and caregivers naturally want to "make things better." When grieving, it's helpful to acknowledge that the situation can't "be fixed." While painful to watch, children have to process their own grief, with adult support.

"It's time to say good-bye to grandpa, Marcus. It looks like he is going to die very soon."

CAREGIVER RESPONSE:

- Social support will be critical during this time, so ensure that children have access to other friends and family through whatever means possible to help the child cope as the death draws near.
- Seek religious/spiritual help or professional counseling for family support.
- If possible, work with your loved one's medical providers to coordinate a deathbed good-bye or vigil. Model for your child how to say the things you want to say to your loved one for the last time. Understand this may be overwhelming for everyone and be patient with each other.
- Understand that children will respond differently depending on their age and development. Young children may react to the impending or immediate death of a loved one by playing. Play is the way that young children cope and try to make sense of the world around them. Teens may want to isolate and talk to their friends. This is also normal. Give teens space to process but keep reminding them you are there for them.
- If your child does not want to say good-bye, provide time and space to digest the information. Ask again at a later time if it would be helpful to write a letter or draw a picture to say good-bye.
- While the death may occur in one day, grief does not. Saying good-bye will be an ongoing process. Seek support for yourself and your family. Let your child lead the grief process. Check back in with your children on a regular basis during your family's bereavement.

Resources

For more information, visit:

>> https://www.dougy.org/news-events/news/supporting-children-teens-when-a-family-member-is-dying-in-a-hospital-or-ca/2164/

>> https://reachinstitute.asu.edu/programs/resilient-parenting-for-bereaved-families-from-science-to-service

>>www.tagcenter.org

Extra Help

Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children's/ teens' abilities to function or you are worried, contact your child's doctor, a mental health professional, or your local bereavement center. If you need some extra help, seek similar services for yourself. There are helplines as well as mental health professionals providing their services through telehealth. One such hotline for support regarding anxiety or stress is the SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800 -985-5990 or by texting TalkWithUs to 66746. The Lucine Center for Trauma and Grief (www.lucinecenter.com) also provides teletherapy to children and teens who may be struggling after a death.

This fact sheet was co-sponsored by the New York Life Foundation and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Drawing from experiences of bereaved caregivers, researchers and mental health professionals, the developers of this fact sheet include Jeanette Koncikowski, John Hill, Julie Kaplow, Irwin Sandler, Shannon CrossBear, Sharon LeGore, Sarah Gardner, Diane Lanni, Chris Foreman, and Jill Harrington-LaMorie.



New York Life Foundation