

Explaining Death to a Child

Explaining death to a child can be confusing and difficult. For children, trying to understand death can feel like a jigsaw puzzle. For adults, it is hard to find the words to explain what happened in terms that children can understand. At Judi's House, we know it is important to use concrete language when answering the questions of how and why a person died. It helps to deliver these messages in small bits, knowing that children will ask you further questions when they need more pieces to complete the puzzle. Remember to be open and honest while following their lead. It is okay to say, "I don't know." We know the information below does not cover all of your child's questions. Please contact us if you need additional support.

Explaining dying, death, and dead

- Death happens when the body gets so old, sick or hurt that it stops working.
- Everything that lives dies at some time. Plants die, animals die, and people die. Death is a natural part of life.
- When a person dies, their body stops working. Their brain can't send or receive messages, their heart stops beating, their lungs stop working, and their body cannot feel or move.
- A dead person might look like they are sleeping, but they are not sleeping and will not wake up.
- When a person dies, they cannot come back to life.

Explaining causes of death

- It's important to remember that words or thoughts never cause someone to die.
- Death happens by choice or not by choice:
 - Murder is when someone *chooses* to end another person's life.
 - Cancer is not a choice.
 - Suicide is when someone *chooses* to end their own life.
 - A heart attack is not a choice.
- Sometimes medicine and treatment can help a person to get better. Other times, medicine and treatment does not help, and they die.
- Most things that people die from are not contagious, meaning you can't catch them.

- The flu, a cold, and chicken pox are contagious.
- Cancer, heart attacks, and depression are not contagious.

Explaining specific types of death

Aneurysm/Stroke: The pathways that carry blood get weak or clogged and develop a bubble. If the bubble pops or the clog stops the blood from moving, it damages the brain and the body stops working.

Cancer: A person's body is made up of cells. Cancer is when the cells don't grow right and they make the body sick. Sometimes cancer causes a lump or bump to grow, and sometimes cancer can make the blood, bones, or other parts of the body so sick that the body stops working.

Heart attack: A person's heart is the engine that moves blood through their body. When the heart stops working, it can't move the blood through their body.

Kidney failure: The kidneys wash the blood in the body. If a person's kidneys stop working, the blood gets dirty and poisons their body.

Murder/Homicide: Murder is when somebody does something that makes someone else's body stop working.

Overdose: If people take too much medicine, drugs, or alcohol, it can make their body stop working. For some people, a sickness in their brain called addiction makes them want more and more. Medicine is okay, as long as you take what the doctor tells you to take.

Suicide: When there's a sickness in a person's brain (e.g., depression, addiction, mental illness), the sickness can make the person feel so sad and lonely that they don't want to live anymore. When they feel this way, some people decide to do something to make their own body stop working.

©2023 Judi's House/JAG Institute