



Preparing a child for the loss of a loved one

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‘It is important for children to be involved in discussions around the death of a loved one. It creates an open and honest communication environment’

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Introduction

Telling a child that someone close to them is going to die, or has just died, is a difficult task. It is likely you will still be processing the information yourself. This leaflet aims to offer support and guidance to start this challenging conversation with your child and help you find ways to support them to say goodbye.

It is important for children to be involved in discussions around the death of a loved one. It creates an open and honest communication environment and ensures they receive factual information, rather than imagining inaccurate alternatives.

You might feel that your child won't be able to cope or understand but involving them helps them see that their emotions are healthy and natural. It may also reduce their worries and sense of loneliness about the situation. It could help them to feel more in control and prepared when their loved one dies.

It is important to remember that you know your child best and every child is different. The information below offers some ideas and guidance for you to draw upon based on your knowledge of your child's age, development and needs.



For further support and advice from one of our experienced support workers, contact Jigsaw South East on 01342 313895 or info@jigsawsoutheast.org.uk

Telling your child that a loved one is going to die

Telling a child or young person that someone is going to die can be very emotional. If you can, take some time to think about what you will say, where you will say it and who will be present.

If you need to tell more than one child, you may want to speak with them separately, depending on their age and understanding; then you could have a conversation together afterwards. Alternatively, you could tell them together but talk to them individually later to make sure they feel supported.

If you can, you may prefer to talk to your child in a place where they feel safe and comfortable, like at home. If you do not have this option, the hospital should have a quiet family room where you can speak.

It is vital you have time and space to talk uninterrupted. Think about having someone there to support you if you feel this is appropriate.



How do I begin the conversation?

It will probably feel difficult to know what to say or how to begin the conversation. You may find it helpful to ask your child what they know already, which will guide your conversation.

Try to:

- Use clear and simple language e.g. dying and death.
- Avoid using euphemisms, like 'losing' or 'lost'. These can be confusing for children and easily misinterpreted.
- Be as specific as you can. Children worry more when things aren't clear.
- Give information in small chunks rather than telling them everything in one go.
- Check your child's understanding as you go along.
- Take it at your child's pace and be prepared for them to react in their own way. For some children this may mean becoming tearful, angry, or leaving the room. Some children may not react at all. These are all normal responses as they process this difficult information.



Ideas for how you could start the conversation

You could start with what your child knows already. Their response may help you to understand how much they already know.

E.g. "You know that [name] is very unwell, and the doctors have been trying to make them better?"

You could then say something like:

"Sadly [name's] illness has become a lot worse and the doctors have tried everything they can. There isn't anything more they can do now to make them better, and that means they won't live for much longer. This means that they will die. We don't know exactly when this will be, but the doctors think it will be very soon."

- If you become upset and tearful, that is OK. You are showing your child that it is safe for them to show their emotions.
- You may need to repeat explanations.
- It is important to reassure your child that they are not to blame. It will help relieve any anxiety that they caused this to happen, or could have stopped it from happening.
- Finish the conversation by letting your child know that you are there for them to answer questions and discuss any worries.
- Your child may need to know who will look after them and how their lives and routines are likely to be affected.
- It is important to check what your child has heard and how much they understand. You may want to ask some of the following questions:
 - "How do you feel about what I've told you?"
 - "How can we look after each other?"



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Answering Difficult Questions

Your child might ask questions which you find difficult to answer and it is OK if you do not know how to respond to all their questions. You could reply with:

"I don't know the answer to that right now, but as soon as I have more information, I will let you know".

Some children might not have any questions at first. You might want to set up a question box or worry bag for them to add questions to at a later stage.

Self-Care

Having this conversation is likely to be emotionally challenging, and you will need some space and support afterwards to process it. Think about what you will do after the conversation and who can support you.

These organisations can provide you with further advice:

Call Samaritans helpline: 116 123 (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Cruse Bereavement Care 0808 808 1677

National Bereavement Partnership 0800 448 0800

Sudden Bereavement helpline 0800 2600 400

At A Loss www.ataloss.org

Surrey Suicide Bereavement Service www.ssbs.org.uk

The Good Grief Trust www.thegoodgrieftrust.org



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Supporting your child to say goodbye in person

You may feel worried about your child visiting their loved one to say goodbye. Your decision may depend upon the age of your child, the condition of their loved one and your child's desire to visit.

Research has shown that children over the age of four generally find visiting a dying relative helpful as it increases their understanding and involvement and reduces their feelings of isolation and fear.

The nursing staff and doctors caring for your loved one will also be able to advise you and provide you with practical suggestions in managing a visit.



Preparing your child to visit a loved one in Intensive Care

- Talk to your child in advance about what to expect and consider showing them a photo of their loved one to help prepare them for a visit. You may need to explain that their loved one is connected to several machines and drips.
- They need to know that an alarm going off does not necessarily mean a problem or emergency. Many machines have alarms that sound to let staff know that something needs doing, for example, if a drip needs to be changed.
- Explain that their loved one may look very different from usual. The fluids they receive, which keep them hydrated may make them look bloated, and tubes and injections can cause bruising.
- If the patient is on a ventilator, explain that the nurses must regularly clear their chest of mucus and fluid. They do this by putting a thin tube into the breathing tube to suck up the mucus. This is quite noisy and may cause the patient to cough or make loud noises.
- Tell your child that they may not be able to sit on the bed, but they will be able to talk to their loved one and hold their hand.

There may be occasions when saying goodbye in person is not possible. The following suggestions can take place in person, or virtually.



Ways to connect and say goodbye

In times where restrictions may stop you from being physically present with your loved one, you may feel helpless and very isolated. The ideas below may help you feel connected and closer to your loved one despite not being able to be with them in person.

1. Phones and Tablets

If possible, give your loved one a phone or tablet and make sure hospital staff can access their passcode if there is a screen lock. If you do not have access to a phone or tablet, the hospital may have one they can give to your loved one.

If your child speaks over the phone, it is possible that their loved one may seem disorientated or confused. It may be best to keep conversations short. Hearing familiar voices is likely to be helpful, even if at the time the conversation seems muddled or unusual.

Before video calls, remember to prepare your child for the possibility that their loved one may look different, and talk about the sights and sounds in the room. If you are worried about your child seeing their loved one, then a phone call may be better.

Help your child think about what they might like to say and explain that their loved one may not be able to reply, but they will hear them talking. Do encourage your child to say goodbye at the end of each call in case they do not have the opportunity to do this again. This can be done subtly, e.g., "Time to say goodbye now".

If your child finds it easier, you could pre-record a message instead. Hospital staff can then play this to your loved one.



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2. Sounds from Home

Consider making a recording of the sounds from your home. Simple sounds like your children running around and playing or dogs barking may be comforting for your loved one to hear.

3. The Invisible String

The Invisible String is a children's book that describes the connections between people, even at a distance. You can find a video of the book being read on YouTube.

4. Writing Messages

You could encourage your child to write their loved one a letter or card. This could be a chatty, news-style letter, or they may have things that they want to tell their loved one.

It can be hard to know where to start so Julie Stoke's *Little Box of Big Things* can provide a helpful framework to support this. This could then be read out to your loved one either by you or healthcare staff.

5. Transitional Objects

You could give your loved one something to keep close that reminds them of your child, e.g. a cuddly toy sprayed with a familiar fragrance. In exchange, your child could keep something of theirs close, e.g. a jumper or scarf, sprayed with their perfume/aftershave. Scents can be powerful and emotive and help your child and their loved one to feel connected.



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6. Beyond the Door Visualisation

By phone, ask your loved one to look towards the door, or the curtain of their cubicle. You can say something like:

"Beyond that door, not too far away, I am here, thinking about you, sending you all my/ our love. Just beyond that door, you should be able to feel it from where you are, you are not alone. I want you to remember that if you feel worried or lonely later, you are not alone."

You may prefer to explain this in your own way. Comforting words will help your loved one remember the love and connection in their life even when you are not physically there with them.

When you speak to your loved one on the phone, as you end your call, you might like to remind them again:

"Don't forget, we are just beyond the door, thinking of you and sending you love".

7. The National Children's Bureau have produced a post card to give to young people with lots of ideas to connect with a loved one who is seriously ill. <http://bit.ly/3pUpks1>



Telling your child their loved one has died

Telling a child that someone close to them has died is a difficult task, especially as it is likely you will still be processing the news yourself. This leaflet aims to offer you support and guidance to start this challenging conversation with your child and help you to find ways to support them to say goodbye.

Children need to be involved in discussions around the death of a loved one.

It creates an open and honest communication environment and ensures they receive factual information, rather than imagining inaccurate alternatives. Involving your child will allow you to help them to understand that their emotions are healthy and natural. It may help them to feel less lonely and worried.

You might feel like your child won't be able to cope or understand what is happening, but they may feel less worried if they know about the situation.

It is important to remember that you know your child best and every child is different. The information below offers some ideas and guidance for you to draw upon based on your knowledge of your child's age, development and needs.



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How do I begin the conversation?

Telling a child that someone close to them has died is a difficult task.

Try to:

- Use clear and simple language e.g. dead and died.
- Avoid using euphemisms, like lost. These can be confusing for children and easily misinterpreted.
- Be as specific as you can. Children worry more when things are not clear.
- Give information in small chunks rather than telling them everything in one go.
- Check your child's understanding as you go along.
- Take it at your child's pace and be prepared for them to react in their own way. For some children this may mean becoming tearful, angry, or leaving the room. Some children may not react at all. These are all normal reactions as they process this difficult information.

You could start with what your child knows already. Their response may help you to understand how much they already know.

"You know that [name] is very unwell, and the doctors have been trying to make them better."



You could then say something like:

"Sadly [name's] illness/injuries has/have become a lot worse, and the doctors have tried everything they can. There wasn't anything more they could do to make them better, and that means [name] died."

"I have something very sad and difficult to tell you. [Name] died. You remember I told you that they had [name of illness] and that the doctors and nurses were doing all they could to make them better? Sadly, despite all that the doctors and nurses did, the illness became too strong, and [name's] body could not get better. Their lungs stopped working, and their heart stopped beating, and they died."

"Sadly, [name] has died. We all wish they hadn't died and had lived for many more years. However, their body was not able to keep working. Their heart stopped beating, their lungs stopped breathing, and their brain stopped thinking, and so they died."

You will need to give your child the opportunity to ask further questions and share their worries. You may need to reassure them that you are not going to die as well.

"You may feel very worried about me too, but I am very healthy, and I am going to do all I can to keep that way."



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After the conversation:

- You may need to repeat explanations more than once.
- It is important to reassure your child that they are not to blame; that nothing they have or haven't done or said caused this to happen or could have stopped it from happening.
- Your child may need to know who will look after them and how their lives and routines are likely to be affected.
- It is essential to check what your child has heard and how much they understand. You may want to ask some of the following questions:
“How are you feeling about what I've told you?”
“How can we look after each other?”
“If you had to explain this to your (favourite toy/friend), what would you say?”
- Finish the conversation by letting your child know that you are there for them to answer questions and discuss any worries.
- Remember that processing difficult information takes time, and your child's reaction and emotions may change over time as they begin to process the news.



Answering Difficult Questions

Your child might ask questions which you find difficult to answer, and it's OK if you don't know how to respond to all of their queries.

You could reply with:

"I don't know the answer to that right now, but as soon as I have more information, I will let you know".

Some children might not have any questions at first. You might want to set up a question box or worry bag for them to add questions to at a later stage.

Self-Care

Having this conversation is likely to be emotionally challenging, and you will need some space and support afterwards to process it. Think about what you will do after the conversation and who can support you.

These organisations can provide you with further advice:

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Saying Goodbye

When someone close to them has died, it is not unusual for a child to be anxious about their loved one's body being safe and cared for. They may need to know where the body is and who is looking after it.

Some children may require more information and may ask to see their loved one's body. This is perfectly natural and, for some, is what they need to do in order to make some sense of what has happened.

You may feel worried about your child visiting their loved one to say goodbye. Your decision may depend upon the age of your child, the condition of their loved one and your child's desire to visit. Due to any current restrictions, it may not be possible for your child to say goodbye in person.

Preparing your child to view their loved one's body

- Be guided by what feels right for you and your child, but it can help to talk things through with someone from outside of the family.
- Consider organising an initial viewing without your child. This will enable you to experience your own reactions without having to support your child at the same time.
- Talk to your child in advance about what to expect to help prepare them for the visit. Children are better equipped to make the decision that is right for them if they have the information they need.

You may want to say:

"If you think that you would like to see [name's] body that is OK. Going to see [name's] body is a good opportunity for you to say your own special goodbye to them. It might help you to understand that [name] really is dead. We are all going to miss [name] a lot."

"Different people have different feelings when they see a body. You might want to cry, you might not. You can spend as long or as little time with [name's] body as you want."

"If you want to, you can take something with you to leave with [name's] body, perhaps some flowers, or you could draw a picture if you wanted and take that. What do you think?"

"You will only see [name's] body, not anyone else's. They will be lying in a long box called a coffin. The room will be quiet and only you and I and the person from the funeral home will be there. [Name] will look very pale and his/ her eyes will be shut. It will be cool in the room. [Name] is dressed in one of his/her favourite outfits, the one he/she wore on [occasion]."

- Explain that their loved one may look and feel very different from how they normally looked.

You could say:

"If you want to touch [name] you can, but you do not have to. He/she will feel cold, and his/ her skin will be very pale. This is because the blood has stopped pumping around his/ her body."

Reassure them that they can change their minds right up until the last minute. They might choose to peer in through the door instead, or you could take something in on their behalf.

Child Bereavement UK has some useful guidance on viewing a loved one's body with your child.



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Remembering their loved one

- It may be comforting for your child to have something that belonged to the person who died, such as an item of clothing. You could spray this with a familiar perfume or aftershave.
- Your child could draw a picture or write a letter to be placed in their loved one's coffin.
- Make a memory or treasure box where the child can keep all the treasured items that remind them of their special person.
- Staff on the unit caring for their loved one may have memory boxes or ideas they can share with the child, e.g., handprints or a lock of hair.
- Share happy stories and talk about the person who has died.
- Look through old photographs or videos.
- Start a journal of memories that can be added to by anyone at any time. This may help children who have lost someone at a young age to remember their loved one as they grow up.
- Involve your child in choosing pictures for the funeral and a social media memorial page.



Ongoing advice and support

For further advice on bereavement support for children and young people, including advice on preparing children for a funeral, returning to school and explaining the death of a loved one to their friends and peers, please contact Jigsaw South East on 01342 313895 or info@jigsawsoutheast.org.uk to talk to one of our dedicated support workers.

Further advice and guidance available at:

Jigsaw South East www.jigsawsoutheast.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK www.childbereavementuk.org

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org



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'Jigsaw helped us get through the worst time in our lives. I don't know what we would have done without them'





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the Critical Care Team at
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