



# How to Talk to a Child about Death

**D**id you know that many children have had some type of experience with death by the age of five? Do you struggle with how to approach this subject with your child? Let us help you... When beginning a conversation about death, begin with short direct statements which include the specific words "dead" or "died." Do not overwhelm a child with all details of the situation. Allow the child to ask questions, knowing that there are no bad questions. Remember, as adults, we do not know all of the answers and it is alright to let a child know that sometimes there are no answers to life's experiences.

When introducing the concept of death and dying to a child, the number one thing to remember is to be honest. Parents have a tendency to want to protect their children from death; however, children who go through a good grieving process will develop skills in handling loss they will use for the rest of their lives.

An important point to remember when talking about death around a child is to avoid euphemisms, such as:

- fell asleep;
- passed away;
- we lost him/her; and
- gone to a better place.

Why should we avoid these phrases? Because children have such concrete thinking and limited vocabulary, they take these common sayings literally. This can manifest into real fears for the child. If using the word "sleep" to explain death, a child could begin to fear sleeping because they associate it with dying. Simply put, one must keep with the facts of a situation and allow children to ask questions to clarify their thoughts.

Taking advantage of the teachable moments in life is the ideal time to introduce the concept of death and dying to a child. One of these moments might be talking about a death in nature, such as a cat bringing home a dead bird, or a death occurring on a television program or movie. There are many child-friendly movies in which death is a large part of the story, as in Disney's *Lion King* and *Finding Nemo*, and watching these with your child can provide a perfect opportunity to talk with them about death and common feelings of grief.

To find more guidance in how to talk with your child about death, contact Family LifeCare's *Wings of Hope*, a complimentary service for grieving children, which is available to anyone in the community by calling 1-800-355-2817. ✖

