

What to Say to a Child When a Parent Dies

Here are some recommendations on how to approach the topic of death and what to say to a child when a parent dies.



How to tell a child their parent has died

Telling a child their parent has died will always be difficult. If you're lost for words and don't know what to say to a child when a parent dies, you're not alone. Death is an uncomfortable topic for adults, so we often avoid discussing it with our children. However, delaying the news of their parent's death or trying to soften your words will not help you child nor will it lessen their pain.

If you are in a position where you need to inform a child of their parent's death, this is what you can do:

1 Create a safe space

You should choose a quiet space where you can talk without distractions. Include another adult if their presence will comfort your child or you.

2 Be prompt and honest

When approaching your child about the death of their parent, use care and be direct: "I need to tell you something important that will be hard to talk about. Dad died today." Pause, give your child a moment to process this information, and answer the questions they ask you honestly. Use age-appropriate language when discussing the details of the death, if you have multiple children then start with the language appropriate for the youngest child.

3 Be straight-forward

Selecting the right words is important when deciding what to say to a child when a parent dies. Use words when talking about the death, like "died", "death", and "cancer". Euphemisms like "passed away", "not well", and "went away" are too vague and can confuse children. They also might lead to your child jumping to wrong conclusions, like thinking everyone who is sick will die, or their parent will come back.

4 Establish open communication

Your child will have a lot of questions, and you may not know all the answers. This is ok, you just need to keep the lines of communication open so your child feels comfortable voicing their thoughts and feelings. Talk about your feelings and show that you are available to answer questions they have. Including your child in your grief and keeping them informed will help them feel more in control and secure in the knowledge that your family will get through this together.



5 Provide comfort

Children will react differently to the news their parent has died, some will cry, some will ask questions, some will get angry, and some may not seem to react at all. It is important that you remain close to your child during the conversation, reinforce that you are both safe, offer hugs, and highlight that they will be cared for and loved no matter what. Body language and non-verbal communication can be just as important as what you say to a child when their parent dies.

6 "You are not to blame"

Children tend to believe they cause things to happen by what they say or do, so you need to reassure them by emphasizing that their parent's death wasn't caused by anything they said or did.

7 Discuss next steps

The death of a parent will inevitably change your child's regular routine. Be clear about any new arrangements that have been made so your child can anticipate those changes, for example: "I will pick you up from school like Mum used to."

8 Funerals and memorials

It can be helpful to include your child in mourning rituals, like viewings, funerals, and memorials. Make sure you explain ahead of time what they should expect. Offer your child a role in the rituals as even a small role can help them take control of the emotional situation and give them a memory of being involved in the collective grief. Of course, you should let your child decide whether or not they would like to take part.

Need more support?

Although the death of your child's parent can make you and your child feel lonely, it's important to remember that you are not alone. When you feel overwhelmed, [practice self-care](#) and reach out to access [additional grief support services](#).



[Feel the Magic](#) offers free [camps](#) to help support you and your child in the difficult time following the death of a parent.

If you would like to join a support network of other families who understand what you're currently experiencing, [join our grief community](#).

Visit our [Parent and Guardian Grief Resources](#) or download our brochures on parenting through immediate loss for children aged [7-9](#), [10-13](#), or [14-17](#).