

WHAT TO SAY TO CHILDREN WHEN SOMEONE THEY LOVE IS DYING



Telling a child that someone they love is going to die is probably one of the hardest conversations you will have with them. It's natural to want to protect children from pain and it may well be a time when you yourself are feeling vulnerable and sad. Talking things through can make the situation also feel painfully real.

However, children quickly sense when something is wrong with the people they are close to. By avoiding a difficult conversation with them about their worries and what is happening, they can be left feeling confused, angry, scared or even have a sense of guilt that they are in some way responsible. It is more helpful to support children through these new experiences and for them to understand this is a new and painful experience for you as well.

It is best for a child to hear upsetting news from an adult that they trust. Children also need to be reassured that, even if someone they love is seriously ill, they will still be looked after and cared for.

AGES & STAGES

Five year olds and under

Children of this age often fear being separated from someone they love – giving them something special such as a cuddly toy or blanket, 'from' their loved one can help to comfort them. Young children may feel that they are in some way responsible for an illness and letting them know that the illness is not

their fault is important. They may also need to be reassured that the illness is not 'catching'.

Children at this age may show signs of regression in their behaviour, for example, wetting the bed or having tantrums. This is perfectly normal and a response to the stress they may be experiencing. Informing a child's school or nursery about the situation will enable them to offer support.

Six to twelve year olds

As children grow older, they begin to have a better understanding of serious illness and dying but their worries turn to whether their loved one will be frightened or in pain. They may express their worries through changes in eating or sleeping habits. Friendships and schoolwork may be affected or, just like younger children, they may regress in their everyday behaviour.

Let them know it is okay for them to continue to enjoy themselves with activities and friendships. Encourage them to be involved with simple care for their loved one by, for example, bringing in some flowers, pictures, or favourite music into their loved one's Hospice room.



Teenagers

The teenage years are not an easy time, with a mixture of complicated emotions and increasing pressures at school. Some teenagers are reluctant to engage in conversation about a serious illness which affects a person they love; others may express their distress through anger or what appears to be thoughtless behaviour. Families can help them by reassuring them that there is no right or wrong way to feel.

Include children in conversations but recognise that they may choose to confide in someone else, maybe a friend or another relative. Although this may be uncomfortable for parents or carers, it might be because they are concerned about admitting their emotions or because they are trying to appear strong for other members of their family.

Teenagers may find that they have to take on more chores or responsibilities during a time of family illness. Try to make this a positive experience by acknowledging their efforts and allowing them to feel they are making a valuable contribution. Reassurance that it is acceptable for them to continue seeing friends or taking part in activities can help them to maintain stability in their lives at this tough time.

PHRASES BEST AVOIDED

Using the words 'death' and 'dying' may be uncomfortable for you, especially when you are coming to terms with your own feelings but being specific when speaking to children will help them to understand the situation more clearly.

It is best to avoid using the phrase 'losing someone.' This can create confusion for a child who might then be waiting for the loved one to come back.

Also suggesting that their loved one will 'fall asleep and not wake up again' can be very frightening for them and might cause them to worry about sleeping generally.

Sometimes it is tempting to say, for example, that 'daddy' or 'mummy' has a 'poorly head' but naming an illness can make things less vague for them. Without additional information they may worry that anyone they love who feels 'poorly' may have the same illness.

TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

- ♥ Keep language clear and simple.
- ♥ Choose a time and environment where you will not be interrupted. We have a quiet room away from the inpatient unit which you are welcome to use if you find being away from the home environment easier.
- ♥ Take time to listen to what a child is saying – they need to know you are taking their concerns seriously.
- ♥ If you don't know the answer, say so.
- ♥ Younger children often need time to process what you are saying. Don't worry if they appear to switch topics or decide to go and play when you are talking. They will choose how much information they can take in at any one time.
- ♥ You can emphasize that you and the medical team have done everything they can and that no one has failed.
- ♥ You may find that you have to repeat conversations – this is perfectly normal and enables a child to work through their feelings and begin to understand them.
- ♥ Don't be afraid to show your own feelings, by doing so you will allow a child to feel it's acceptable to show their own.

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ORGANISATIONS

Winston's Wish

Provides information, resources and advice for children who are bereaved and their families.

winstonswish.org.uk

Helpline: 08088 020 021

Hope Support Services

UK charity which supports children and young people, (11-25), when a close family member is suffering from cancer, or other serious illness.

hopesupport.org.uk

Tel: 01989 566317

Riprap

This is a UK charity which supports children and young people, (11-25), when a close family member is suffering from cancer, or other serious illness. There is an online service and peer support community.

riprap.org.uk

USEFUL LINKS

Macmillan

macmillan.org.uk

[Talking to children and teenagers about cancer](#)

Marie Curie

mariecurie.org.uk

[Telling a child someone is dying](#)

Cancer Research UK

cancerresearchuk.org.uk

[What to tell children when someone is dying](#)



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martlets.org.uk/donate



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