

Who do some children seem “indifferent” ?

- Due to differences in temperament and understanding, some children may appear indifferent to the news and continue to play as if nothing has happened. This does not mean they are not hurting; rather, they are processing and adapting to the loss at their own pace.
- Family members should continue to provide companionship and care, and let the child know they can talk anytime. For example, gently ask: “Have you thought about (name of the loved one) lately?” or “It’s fine if you want to play now, but I’m here to listen if you want to talk.” Do not force them to cry or talk, but don’t stop caring just because they seem unaffected.
- Family members can also show them how to express emotions. For example, “I cry too, because I miss them very much. Crying is a way to show how much we miss someone.” Reassure children that expressing their grief is okay and acceptable.

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After Breaking the News

- As an adult, you must also take care of your own emotions, since children learn how to cope with death and grief by observing the adults around them. Family support and the honest, calming presence of adults are crucial to helping children face loss.
- Allow children to decide whether to attend the funeral and how they wish to participate. Provide support throughout the process.
- Consider seeking professional help if the child exhibits prolonged emotional fluctuations, regressive behaviours (e.g., bed-wetting, fear of the dark, or excessive attachment), or noticeable changes in sleep or appetite over an extended period.



How to Inform a Child about the Death of a Loved One



Dear Caregivers,

The death of a loved one often evokes feelings of sadness, fear, or helplessness. A child's understanding of death and their grief responses can vary depending on their age and developmental stage. Your honesty and calming presence are essential in helping them cope with the loss.

The following suggestions may be helpful:

1 Preparation: Creating a Safe Environment

- Choose a quiet, safe, and familiar place (e.g., a spot in your home where the child often spends time). Allow plenty of time to avoid rushing or interruptions during the conversation.
- The child's closeness to the deceased may affect how they react. Try to anticipate their level of understanding and possible reactions so you can plan your choice of words and responses in advance.

2 Delivering the News

- Prepare the child emotionally. For example, "I have something sad to tell you. It might make you feel uncomfortable, but I am right here with you."
- Pay attention to the child's body language and facial expressions. Accept that the child may resist listening. Pause, offer hugs, and give them space if needed.
- Deliver the news honestly and simply. For example, "(Name of the loved one) has passed away, which means he/she has died, and we won't be able to see him/her again." Respond to the child's questions about death and provide appropriate support based on their age and developmental stage.

Understanding of Death and Appropriate Support for Children of Different Ages

Early Childhood

Age: ~2-5

Understanding of Death

- Children may see death as temporary or reversible, mistakenly believing the deceased will return.

Common Emotional & Behavioural Reactions

- They may ask questions repeatedly and exhibit confusion, anxiety, or regressive behaviours (e.g., bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, or clinginess).

Recommended Communication & Support

- Use picture books or simple, concrete language to explain death (e.g., "The body doesn't move or breathe anymore"). Avoid using vague terms (e.g., "gone to sleep"). Provide a sense of security through hugging and maintaining daily routines. Let the child express emotions through drawing or play.

Later School Age

Age: ~9-12

Understanding of Death

- They understand that death is irreversible and universal, and they may have questions about the biological or religious aspects of death.

Common Emotional & Behavioural Reactions

- They may experience sadness, irritability, and emotional fluctuations. They may also appear uncharacteristically mature, or act detached.

Recommended Communication & Support

- Encourage questions and the expression of feelings. Validate conflicting emotions (e.g., feeling both sad and angry). May create memory books or look at old photos to help them process their experiences.

Early School Age

Age: ~6-9

Understanding of Death

- They begin to understand that death is permanent, but may mistakenly believe their actions can change the outcome or cause death.

Common Emotional & Behavioural Reactions

- They may worry about losing other family members. They may also experience anxiety, changes in appetite or sleep, and self-blame or guilt. They may become clingier than usual, or act "well-behaved and mature".

Recommended Communication & Support

- Encourage questions and clarify in simple terms (e.g., "They didn't pass away because of anything you did"). Allow the child to participate in memorial activities. Let them express emotions through drawing or play while maintaining their daily routines.

Adolescence

Age: ~12+

Understanding of Death

- Their understanding of death is similar to that of adults, and they begin to contemplate the meaning of life.

Common Emotional & Behavioural Reactions

- They may feel angry, indifferent and withdrawn. They may also downplay their feelings or become overly independent.

Recommended Communication & Support

- Communicate with respect and as equals. Allow them to choose how they wish to mourn. Encourage the expression of feelings through writing, music, or creative outlets.