

# How to tell children that someone has died

## STEP 1: PREPARE YOURSELF

- Thinking about talking to children about this probably feels the hardest thing in the world. It's completely understandable to want to protect them from this news.
  - If there is another adult at home with you, share the news with them first, so you can talk to the children together.
  - Write out a simple list of what happened with [Name] e.g. went to hospital, was in a hospice. You can use this to support your conversations with the children.
- Take a minute to breathe as slowly and deeply as you can.
  - Try to keep your focus on the next few minutes and how you want the children to hear the news of their loved one's death.
  - We know that even very young children (under 2 years) often already know something is happening and need an explanation for what they can see and hear around them.
  - This guide has an accompanying animation which can be found here: <https://youtu.be/BwLcJMMCIKO>

## STEP 2: PREPARE INFORMATION

- Take a minute to think about what each of the children know about what has been happening. What's been their understanding and experience of illness and death so far?
  - Children may be aware of phone calls and might be waiting to hear about their loved one. This means you will need to tell them the news as soon as possible, so they are not left worrying about what has happened.
- Even though you need to talk to them as soon as possible after our phone call, it's helpful to look at [this leaflet by the British Psychological Society](#)
  - It's not long and explains what children understand about illness at different ages and levels of maturity.

## STEP 3: PREPARE ENVIRONMENT

- Think about whereabouts in the house you want to talk to the children.
- Depending on the age of the children, decide whether you want to tell them together, or whether very young children can be distracted with the TV or a toy/game while you talk to older siblings first.
- If the children have a special toy or comforter, see if you can have this to hand.

## STEP 4: STARTING OFF

- Asking children to stop what they are doing and come and sit down will prepare them for the conversation to come.
  - Try and speak as slowly as you can and pause between sentences. People often speak quickly when they are upset and nervous.
- *"Can you come here and sit with me for a minute? I need to talk to you."*
  - *"The doctor at the hospital has just called me."*

## STEP 5: EXPLAIN WHAT HAS HAPPENED

- Talk VERY slowly and honestly.
  - To avoid any confusion, you must be very clear the person has died; use the words your family prefers when talking about death.
  - Avoid 'gone to sleep', 'passed away', 'lost' or 'gone to the stars' as young children will be confused and think the person can come back.
  - After you have told the children that [Name] has died, PAUSE for a few seconds to allow them to take in what you have said.
  - Wait until you feel the children are ready for more information.
  - Be aware that their distress makes it harder for them to take in information.
- *"[Name] got more and more poorly/unwell after they went to hospital/hospice and they have died."*
  - *For younger children, you may need to repeat that the person has died and will not and cannot come back.*
  - *For younger children: "[Name] was so poorly that her body stopped working. Their heart stopped and they couldn't breathe any more. [Name] has died."*
  - *Or: "The doctors gave [Name] all the help they could, but nothing worked. They just couldn't make them better, so they died."*
  - *Or for an older child: "[Name] had [illness e.g. really bad infection in their lungs]. Even with all the medicines and machines, the doctors couldn't make them better. I'm very sorry, [Name] has died."*

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## STEP 6: COPING WITH CHILDREN'S REACTION TO THE NEWS

- It's OK to talk with children about how upsetting and sad this news is for everybody.
- Sharing your feelings can be helpful, but children might find it frightening to see you completely overwhelmed with distress.
- It is useful if you name your emotion, for example explain that you are feeling sad and that you are crying because you can feel better after a good cry.
- Younger children may focus much more on the practical aspects of how the situation will change their day to day life; 'who will play football with me?' They might not show an immediate reaction to the news (for example wanting to go and play) but this doesn't necessarily mean they didn't hear the news or that they're only thinking about themselves.

Children can have many different reactions to the news. Here are some examples, with suggestions for how you can respond:

Crying or possibly shouting:

- "I know that it is very, very sad. It's hard to take it all in"

Repeatedly saying "I don't believe you, you are wrong, it's not true":

- "I know this is very difficult for you to take in."

Go very quiet:

- "I know, it's really hard to believe this is happening?"
- "I know this is sad and upsetting to think about, but it's better that we share our feelings and talk about our worries, rather than struggling with it alone."

## STEP 7: PREPARING FOR CHILDREN'S COMMON QUESTIONS

- It can be helpful to think about how you will answer common questions the children may ask.
- You need to think about the age of the children and what they will be able to understand. Think about what they know and understand already.
- Ask if they would like more information or have questions about what has happened.

- Children often want to know what caused the death and are worried that it was because of something they thought, said or did.
- It is important to repeat that [Name] had [Illness] were cared for by the medical team and that it was nobody's fault.
- Children may ask you if you or they are going to die, who will look after them and whether they will catch [illness].
- "I know this has been a very difficult conversation. There has been a lot to take in; is there anything you want to ask or don't understand?"
- Remind them of other special people in their family as well as their friends, all of whom love and care for them.

## STEP 8: FINISHING THE CONVERSATION

- Reassure them they will not have to manage this alone.
- It is really helpful for children to have somebody to talk to outside of the family. Being able to share their feelings without worrying about upsetting you is important. You can help children think about who they love and trust to support them.
- You may need to return to this conversation several times, particularly with younger children. This is very normal as they slowly make sense of what has happened.

- *"I know this feels so much right now. What I do know for sure is that I love you very much. We will get through this together, whatever the future holds."*
- *"Shall we think about who else might be a good person for you to talk to?"*
- *"Do you want to think about whether you'd like me to tell your friends, or is that something you want to do?"*

## STEP 9: CARING FOR YOURSELF

- It is very important that you look after yourself. These conversations are the most difficult ones you will ever have to have and are emotionally exhausting. Contact a friend or relative to talk about how you are feeling.
- Connect with other people, groups and organisations that can help support you and your family.

- [www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)
- [www.ruthstraussfoundation.com](http://www.ruthstraussfoundation.com)
- [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)
- [www.winstonswish.org](http://www.winstonswish.org)
- [www.widowedandyoung.org.uk](http://www.widowedandyoung.org.uk)
- [www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement/children-who-are-bereaved/](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement/children-who-are-bereaved/)
- [www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/diagnosed/talking-children/children](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/diagnosed/talking-children/children)