

# How to tell children that someone has died

## International Version



### 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.
  - Is there another adult in the house you would like to share the news with first? Would you feel more comfortable if you talked to the children together?
  - Write out a simple list of what happened with [Name] after they went to hospital. You can use this to support your conversations with the children.
- Take a minute to breathe as slowly and deeply.
  - 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.

### 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?
- How much do you think they know about coronavirus?
- Children will be very aware of any phone calls and will be waiting to hear about their relative. This means you will need to tell them the news as soon as possible, so they are not left worrying about what has happened.

### STEP 3: PREPARE ENVIRONMENT

- Think about where 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 something while you talk to older siblings first.
- If the children have a special toy see if you can have this ready whilst you talk to the children.

### STEP 4: STARTING OFF THE CONVERSATION

- 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 clearly state that [Name] has died.
  - Use the words your family prefers when talking about death.
  - After you have told the children that [Name] has died, BE QUIET for a few moments 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 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. Her heart stopped and she 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] died from coronavirus as it caused a really bad infection in their lungs. This meant they couldn't get enough oxygen into their body. And even with all the medicines and machines, the doctors couldn't either. 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. 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 news such as this. 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 deal 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.
- You may need to return to this conversation several times, particularly with younger children. This is very normal as they try to make sense of what has happened.
- Ask if they would like more information or have questions about what has happened.
- Don't be afraid of saying 'I don't know' if you can't answer a question. Think together about how you could get the information they want or need.

- 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 Coronavirus, 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 it.
- *"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?"*
- Focus on practical information. Tell them the steps everyone is taking to stop the spread of the Coronavirus (washing hands, distancing etc).
- Remind them of other 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 such a big thing to think about 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 would you like to tell them yourself?"*

## 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 can be emotional and painful.
- Find a friend, relative, community/religious leader who you can talk to about how you are feeling.
- Connect with other people, groups and organisations that can help support you and your family.