

Here are our top tips for how to explain death in easy-to-understand language for children.



Use clear and concrete language, such as “dead” and “died.” Avoid phrases such as “passed away” or “she is gone.”



Explain to young children that “dead” means **something physically happened to cause the death**.



Share age-appropriate details, so they understand what they hear.



The news will be hard to process and **you may have to repeat yourself**.



It is okay to tell them you are working on getting more information or **to say you don't know**.



Tell the child what happened, then **listen and provide comfort**.



Be available for questions and **give honest answers**.



Normalize the child's responses to the news with statements such as, “It's okay for you to feel however you feel right now.”



Jessica's House offers free peer support groups for children, teens, young adults and their adult caregivers grieving a death. Each group combines therapeutic talk, play and creative expression to promote healing and hope for the future.

For additional support and resources:

jessicashouse.org

info@jessicashouse.org

or we welcome your call at **(209) 250-5395**

Authors



Erin Nelson, ACTP
Executive Director



Colleen Montague, LMFT
Director of Outreach and Education

Office Hours

Monday – Friday
8 am to 4 pm

1225 W. Christoffersen Pkwy
Turlock, CA 95382

Follow us



How to Inform a Child of a Death



Grief Support for Children, Teens,
Young Adults and Their Families

It's never easy to tell a child that someone has died.

As adults, we hope that children won't experience grief until they grow older. Using honest, easy-to-understand language helps children process their thoughts and reactions. It also helps them maintain a sense of safety and assurance that they did not cause the death. Inform the child of the death as soon as possible. They should hear the news from you rather than from others.



Before meeting with the child, take a moment to process the death yourself and plan how you will share this news.

Calm yourself by taking a few deep breaths or taking a short walk outdoors.

Consider having a support person with you when you share the news. When you tell the child about the death, consider the following:

- Use clear and concrete language, such as “dead” and “died.” To prevent confusion, avoid phrases such as “passed away” or “she is gone.”
- Young children don't fully understand what “dead” means, so explain that something physically happened to cause the death. An example of concrete language: *“I have some sad news. Your mom was in an accident. The accident hurt her body so badly that it stopped working, and she died.”*
- Share age-appropriate details, so they understand what they hear. For example, a child may not understand terms like “cardiac arrest” or “fatality.” They would better understand: *“Her heart stopped working, which made her body stop working.”*
- The news will be hard for the family to process. You may have to repeat yourself and answer their questions more than once.



- It is okay to tell them you are still working on learning more information. Or, if you don't know the answer, it is okay to say you don't know.
- After telling the child what happened, listen and provide comfort. Some children may have questions, while others may take time to process.
- Be available for questions and give honest answers. Before answering, ask the child what they think to give them a chance to share their thoughts and ideas. Their responses will help you understand their processing and provide you with what you need to respond.
- Reflect on what you are noticing. For example, if the child is crying, you might say, *“This is really sad news,”* or *“This is really hard for you to hear.”* There is no right or wrong way to grieve; each person's reaction is as unique as their fingerprint. You can normalize the child's responses to the news with statements such as, *“It's okay for you to feel however you feel right now.”*

