

# Saying Goodbye: Talking to Kids About Death

Death is very difficult for young children to understand, and it can be tough for parents to explain. The best advice: Keep your answers as short and simple as possible, and use these responses as a model.

By Christina Frank from [Parents Magazine](#)

## **Q. My 4-year-old keeps asking me, "Mommy, why did Grandma die?" What should I say?**

A. When a little kid asks such a big question, you may be tempted to soft-pedal the truth. Don't do it: Telling him that "Grandma went to sleep" or "We lost Grandma" will only backfire. "You might confuse your child or even make him afraid to go to sleep at night," says *Parents* advisor David Fassler, MD, clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Vermont College of Medicine, in Burlington.

Instead, say something like, "Your grandma died because she was very old and sick. She doesn't talk or eat or breathe anymore, and we won't see her again. But the love we had for her will stay with us forever." If it helps, you can compare a person's life to a tree's leaves, which bloom in the spring, then change color and die in the fall.

When Donna Maria Johnson's father died, she told her kids, Vanessa, then 5, and Brooks, then 3, that when people get very old, their bodies stop working, just like when a toy's batteries run out. "But then I explained that you can't replace a person's batteries," says the mom from Charlotte, North Carolina. "That made sense to them."

## **Q. My father died recently, and my daughter wants to know where he is now. What should I say?**

A. That depends upon your religious beliefs. "For many families, heaven is an important source of comfort," says Greg Adams, director of the Center for Good Mourning at Arkansas Children's Hospital, in Little Rock. But don't introduce it too early: The notion of a person being dead physically but alive in a spiritual place is too abstract for most kids under age 5. "Until they are ready, heaven can wait," Adams says.



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You can also let your child decide for herself about the afterlife. Say something like, "No one knows for sure. Some people think you go to heaven when you die, while others believe people come back on earth as different creatures. What do you think?"

### **Q. My aunt is dying. Should I take my 5-year-old with me to visit her in the hospital?**

A. Ask him if he'd like to go, suggests Donna Swain, a clinical bereavement counselor at the Center for Grief and Loss at Stella Maris Hospice, in Timonium, Maryland. Since seeing a sick person in the hospital can be scary -- will she be hooked up to tubes and IVs? will she be able to talk? -- prepare your child beforehand.

When Michael Zacharias's sister Lynne was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, his two daughters, who were 5 and 3 at the time, visited her weekly. "They saw her decline gradually, so it wasn't such a shock," says the Glen Allen, Virginia, dad. "My wife, Melissa, and I explained that Aunt Lynne would lose her hair and later on that she might not be able to talk. But Lynne's eyes lit up every time we came, and I think seeing her disease progress made it easier for the girls to accept her death."

**Q. Since my mother died, I've been crying a lot. Will it harm my kids to see me like this?**

A. No. Watching Mommy break down might frighten your kids, but only for a moment. And it will also teach them an important lesson: Adults cry when they're very sad too. So if you can't leave the room to be by yourself, sob away. Just make sure they know you're okay and that you'll take care of them like you always do.

Clare Leschin-Hoar faced this situation when her father died of lung cancer when her children were 7 and 4. "I didn't try to hide my grief," says the Mansfield, Massachusetts, mom. "I wanted them to see how much I loved and missed my dad." To her surprise, the kids wound up comforting her, which eased her sadness.

**Q. My kids are only 5 and 2. Should I take them to my uncle's funeral?**

A. Use your judgment. Although kids may bring comfort to grieving relatives, they can also be disruptive at funerals. It's unrealistic to expect children under 6 to sit quietly through a service. So if they go, take along a friend or a sitter who can watch them and focus on their needs and reactions. "This will make it easier for your kids," says Dr. Fassler.

You should also factor in the likely atmosphere of the ceremony. If it's for someone who died young or unexpectedly, the intense emotions may be difficult for your child to handle. But if the person lived a long, happy life, the mood will probably be a lot lighter. If you decide to let your child attend, give him a preview: "Everyone who loved Uncle Steve wants to remember all the great things about him. That's what a funeral is for."

Connor Shinberger went to her great-grandmother's funeral when she was almost 4. "We told her that she had to be quiet, just like in church, and that we would probably cry, because we're sad that Grandma Roxy isn't with us anymore," says her mom, Darcie, from Macomb, Illinois. "She asked if Grandma would know we were there, and I explained that we would only see her body, because her soul went to heaven to live with Grandpa and keep watch over us. She seemed to accept that pretty easily, and she behaved very well."

**Q. My 7-year-old daughter is heartbroken over losing our cat. How should we pay tribute?**

A. For a child, losing a pet can be as emotional as saying goodbye to a close relative, if not more so. Holding a funeral or making a memorial book with pictures, drawings, and even the animal's collar can be a great way to help her gain closure, says Swain.

Lisa Waller's children were devastated when their dog, Rhett, had to be put to sleep. "We made Jack, who was 6, and Rachel, who was 3, a special album with photos of them together with Rhett," says the Marietta, Georgia, mom. "This helped them remember the wonderful times they had with him."

Although she was tempted to get a new pet right away, Waller felt it was important for her kids to face Rhett's loss rather than simply replacing him. "But Santa brought stuffed-animal boxer pups for both children for Christmas," she says. "Jack sleeps with his every night and calls him Rhett."

## **Reassuring Reads**

These books can help you get the conversation started.

### ***When Dinosaurs Die***

By Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown

This primer explains death and its emotional aftermath in simple language aimed at 5- to 8-year-olds.

- [Find it here](#)

### ***What's Heaven?***

By Maria Shriver

After her great-grandma's death, a young girl learns about the afterlife by asking a series of childlike (yet thought-provoking) questions.

- [Find it here](#)

### ***The Forever Dog***

By Bill Cochran

Mike plans to be with his dog, Corky, forever. But when Corky dies, he learns to cope with the loss -- and to keep Corky's memory alive.

- [Find it here](#)

### ***The Fall of Freddie the Leaf***

By Leo Buscaglia

As the seasons pass, Freddie changes color from green to red to brown before he falls off in the winter, teaching kids that death is part of the cycle of life.

- [Find it here](#)

## **How to Answer: "Am I Going to Die, Mommy?"**

When a young child hears that someone died, it's natural for him to wonder whether he'll die too. When he asks, respond honestly but gently. You might say, "Everybody dies eventually, but most people live for a long, long time, and I'm sure you will too." Let him know that you'll do everything in your power to keep him safe and healthy. Your child may also start worrying about your well-being. If he does, say something like, "Honey, I plan to live a very long time -- until you're a grown-up with kids of your own."

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