

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT HOSPICE AND DEATH/DYING

When someone in a family is ill or dies, many people attempt to protect their children by not talking about sorrow or death. Sooner or later, the child will be confronted with the subject. If a child has some understanding of the meaning of the word “death,” they will be better equipped to deal with the situation when it arises.



The information in this handout is provided by the Healing Patch. It is our hope it will provide you with some support and comfort during a difficult time.

By making “death” a part of everyday life, it will be a natural thing for a child. Flowers that wither and die, or a pet that dies, may provide an opening to start conversations with a child. When talking with a child about a terminal illness and/or a pending death, consider the following principles:

- **Keep the language simple.** Use words like “die” or “died.” Do not use terms like “passed away,” “sleeping,” or “gone.” Children do not understand euphemisms. This may help the adult feel better but only confuses the child.
- **Allow children to ask questions** and be prepared for any type of question. Children will talk about more concrete circumstances, rather than feelings. They may ask such things as “Is it cold and dark under the ground?” or “Are they scared down there?” If these questions make the parent uncomfortable, the child will sense that and stop asking questions.
- **Answer questions honestly and simply.** Detailed information can confuse children. Offer only as much detailed information as requested.
 - Children do not sit down and discuss a subject for long periods of time. They may come running in and ask some of the hardest questions and then want to go back outside to play. It is natural for them to change the subject and return to it later. SEIZING THE MOMENT IS IMPORTANT!
 - It is ok to say “I don’t know.” Children appreciate an honest answer.
- **Assure and reassure the child that they will be cared for** during the patient’s illness and after the patient dies. Children have a common fear that if one parent gets sick and dies, then the other one will also get sick and/or die. Create a plan, and talk to your children about it.
- **Give the child choices.** Allow the child to participate in the death process if they choose. Some children may choose to be present during the death; others may choose to go to school or somewhere else. Familiar routines are comforting. Children may also choose to not participate in the funeral or memorial service. Always allow the child to decide (considering age and developmental stage) whether or not to participate in these processes.