

Helping Toddlers Cope with Grief and Death

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As hard (and painful) as it can be to answer questions about the death of a loved one, it's an important way that toddlers cope with grief and death and can help them develop an understanding of what has happened.



Q: My mother (my toddler's grandmother) just passed away. My son saw his grandmother regularly—about once every week or two—and my mom often watched him overnight to give my husband and me a break. Needless to say, this is a huge loss for me, for my son, and for our whole family. I just have no idea how to talk to a two year old about death and why his grandmother isn't here anymore. Any ideas?

A: First, we offer our deepest sympathy. Losing a parent is often painful and each person experiences the loss differently. This pain and grief can be intensified when we talk with our children, who struggle with understanding death (as we all do!).

Children under 3 need simple, straightforward, and truthful explanations about what has happened. Here are some guidelines for talking about the loss with your toddler:

Start with short, simple and truthful explanations. "Grammy got sick and had trouble breathing. The doctors tried very hard to help her, but she died."

"When someone dies, it means they cannot talk or play anymore. We cannot see them or hug them again. Dying means that their body stopped working."

Start off by giving a short, simple explanation and then wait to see if your child has any more questions. Providing more information than children are asking for can increase their worry or confusion.

Answering Your Toddler's Questions about Death

Common toddler questions about death include:

- Where is Grammy now? Toddlers can be confused by expressions like: "We lost Grammy," "Grammy went to a better place" or "Grammy passed." A toddler may be fearful you may "lose" them too, believe that the person is literally in another place, or be confused about what they have "passed." Sometimes death is described as "going home" or "eternal sleep." Toddlers may start to fear normal activities, like going home after an outing or falling asleep.
- Will you die? Parents can acknowledge the fear but offer reassurance: "I can see why you are worried about that, but we are strong and healthy. We will be here to take care of you for a very long time."
- Will I die? "We eat right, sleep right, and go to the doctor so you can stay healthy and live for a long, long time." Does everyone die? "Eventually, everyone dies. Most people die when they are very, very old like Grammy."
- What if I get sick? "Everyone gets sick sometimes. Mommy and Daddy will take care of you, and the doctors will take care of you too. You will be okay even if you get sick."
- Can I die so I can be with Grammy? "I understand that you want to be with Grammy. I miss her too. When you die, you can't play with your blocks, or eat ice cream, or go on the swings anymore. Grammy would want you to do all those things and I do too."
- What is dying? Keep in mind that young children are not capable of fully understanding death. It can help to offer a simple, concrete explanation: "Grammy's body stopped working. She couldn't eat, or play, or move her body anymore like we do."



If your toddler witnessed any frightening aspect of the loss, they need to hear what happened in age-appropriate terms. For example, children may see/hear the ambulance arrive, observe their parent's fear and worry, or see signs of physical distress such as bleeding. Parents can explain, "It was scary when Grammy was having trouble breathing. That let us know there was something wrong. We called the ambulance so Grammy could go to the hospital very quickly."

Dealing With Behavior Changes

As toddlers cope with grief and death, parents may notice behavior changes in their children after the loss. Even if children don't fully understand death, they do know that something important and lasting has happened. You may notice that your toddler becomes more clingy or demanding, or has more intense separation anxiety. Children may also show changes in sleeping or toileting patterns. These changes are usually temporary and gradually disappear over time when you respond with kindness, patience, and some extra love and attention.

Parents may notice toddlers playing "dying" games. You may see your child doing pretend play where a toy train or stuffed animal may "die." This is very normal. Children show us through their play what they are thinking about. If you wish, consider adding toys like a doctor's kit or ambulance to children's choices so they can explore this theme in their pretend play. Over time, this focus will fade.

Young children may ask the same questions over and over again. As hard (and painful) as it can be to answer questions about the death of a loved one again and again, it's an important way that your toddler develops an understanding of what has happened. Toddlers and preschoolers learn through repetition so hearing the same explanations over and over helps them make sense of this experience.

Supporting Your Toddler

You may find that children's questions come in spurts over several days or weeks as they piece together an understanding of this event.

It's okay to talk about and remember your family member with your child: "Let's make Grammy's favorite muffins this morning. We can remember her while we bake together." Or, "Let me tell you a story about Grammy from when I was a little girl." You can also share photos or sing songs that were favorites of your loved one.

It's okay to cry in front of your child, though it is important to explain why. "I am crying because I am very sad that Grammy died. I miss her." (Important to note: If your grief becomes overwhelming, you deserve support. Reach out to your health care provider for suggestions of local grief counselors or other resources.) If your child's grief seems particularly intense, persistent or seems to interfere with their



play or learning, ask your health care provider to connect you with a mental health professional trained in supporting young children.

Books can also be a powerful tool to help young children make sense of their emotions. See our recommendations for [books to help toddlers cope with grief and death](#).

