



Supporting children facing the illness or loss of a loved one Frequently Asked Questions

Should I talk with my child about the fact that a loved one is very sick and may not survive?

Some families are now wondering whether they should be talking about the likelihood of a death in their own family, a friend's family or in their communities. Others have been forced to do so. From our experience working with patients near end of life, we've come to recognize that, in most cases, being able to talk in advance about a likely death is helpful for children. These are among the most difficult conversations we can imagine having to start. It takes a great deal of courage to be honest with children about a loss that we know will hurt them deeply. There is no way of talking about this that will protect children from painful feelings. But, by making sure they feel connected to loving adults, supported as they experience strong feelings and informed about what is happening, we can prevent confusion or feeling alone with worries from adding to their distress.

Why talking helps

- Parents often want to shield children from distress. They may believe that not talking about upsetting things is the best way to protect children. Unfortunately, when dealing with serious illness, not talking about what is happening has some real risks and does not protect children as well as parents might hope.
- Children are excellent observers—they see, hear and sense things that are going on with the people they love even when adults try to keep things hidden from them. Many children will not bring up on their own the things they notice or feel—they might understand that adults are trying not to talk and follow the adults' lead, or, might not really understand how to talk about an uneasy feeling they are getting. One risk of not talking to children is that they feel anxious, uneasy or worried and are **alone with those worries**.
- Parents may correctly assess that some children are unaware of, or not very worried about, a family member's serious illness. They may wonder how a conversation that will likely upset a child who is not currently distressed could be helpful and believe that putting off difficult conversations as long as possible is the best way to protect children.



- **While delaying a conversation until it is truly unavoidable might postpone a child’s distress, a delay may add to the child’s anxiety or distress after the death.** Children who learn of a loss with little or no warning miss out on time to adjust more gradually, and to receive support as they adjust from a parent or caregiver. This may further decrease their sense that the world is predictable and overall, safe, and increase worry that other sad or frightening surprises could occur.
- Children work hard to understand the world and to make sense of what they see, hear, sense and experience. One way of doing this is to ask questions, and some seem to ask “WHY?” almost constantly. Children are also always creating their own explanations for what they observe—stories that connect the dots of their experiences. Sometimes these stories are right on target (“I hit my sister and she cried, then Mom got mad and gave me a time out because she wants me to use my words when I am frustrated”). But, other times, children’s stories are mixed up or not quite accurate (“I kicked my Dad when we were wrestling, then he got a stomachache and now he has cancer... I guess it’s my fault”).
- Often, children need adults to help them connect the dots and come up with a story that is accurate and helpful. **Children always need an adult’s help to understand a serious illness or a death.** Having the time to process this in advance with an adult, when possible, is better than being surprised with sad news.

Talking honestly with children about your belief that someone they love may die soon allows them to:

- feel included rather than excluded from what is going on
- build trust that they can come to you with questions and concerns, and feel heard and supported
- feel better prepared for what is coming
- understand what is happening, and how their own explanations for what they have noticed might be off the mark
- participate in decisions about how best to utilize the time that is left

Most importantly, talking honestly with children allows adults to understand and respond to children’s worries, **so that a child is not worrying alone.**