

Having difficult conversations with children:

Advice for families

Principles which apply to all difficult conversations:

- The coronavirus pandemic has created worrying and uncertain times for all of us, including children.
- Our individual circumstances make the worry different for each of us: financial worries might be your biggest concern; the strain on relationships confined at home together might be taking their toll; anxiety about a loved one who you cannot visit and who is struggling to cope might overwhelm you; a family member in a vulnerable group or who is already ill might be on your mind; or you may know someone who is dying or has died and be trying to come to terms with this loss.
- Whatever the nature of your situation, discussions with children may be especially difficult.

Don't avoid having them:

- Children are very perceptive. They pick up on mood and feeling and take in far more than you might imagine about what they hear in adults' conversations, on the radio or on television.
- Whilst you might think that you are protecting your child by shielding them from a sad or difficult situation, you might actually be making it more difficult for them - what they imagine from the things they piece together may be worse than the facts.
- Keeping the truth from children for as long as possible can result in a shock down the line when they have to be told bad news – they have less time to process and come to terms with the difficult situation.
- Your child may resent you for having kept information from them. To the sadness you all feel, you may add disharmony.

Think carefully who is the best person to have the conversation:

- If you are unduly upset or worried yourself, you pass on heightened anxiety to your child.
- Consider who else might be able to talk about the difficult situation without being overwhelmed with grief or visible sadness.
- If you are the only adult in the house and don't feel up to it, a Skype, video call, FaceTime, or even phone call with another family member or adult friend of the family might be an alternative.

Be honest:

- Without unduly frightening your child or sharing more than is appropriate given their level of understanding, it is important to be honest.
- Making promises you might not be able to keep, *"I promise everything will be ok"* or *"we will all be fine"* or *"there's nothing for you to worry about"* may seem reassuring. However, if what you tell your child turns out not to be true, you may affect their ability to trust you in the future.

Allow your child to participate fully in the conversation:

- Start by finding out what they already know.
- If they have accurate information about the subject of your difficult conversation, you won't need to start at the beginning. You could just move on to any questions they might want to ask.
- If their information is inaccurate, gently put them right without making them feel dejected or foolish – you want to encourage them to keep sharing, and not be put off for fear of being wrong.
- If your child asks a question to which you don't know the answer make sure you assure them that you will find out and then do so. There are some suggested websites below which might help answer questions.

Talking about death with children:

- Young people may not have encountered death before. Their preconceptions may be from stories, television programmes, films and their imagination.
- It is therefore important to be as clear, reassuring and supportive as possible.
- Whether or not you have a faith, it is important to consider your response to children's questions about what happens after death, before your conversation with your child.
- Being well prepared and choosing a time when you are feeling strongest will help your child to react well.

Minimise the shock:

- Allow your child to work out what you are going to tell them by building up slowly: *"you know that [loved one] has been really poorly and had to go to hospital and it's got worse and worse and sadly [he/she] has now died"*.
- This way, you may find you don't need to actually tell your child that their loved one has died and it will make it easier to accept than a bold statement out of the blue.

Reflect:

- If you have a faith, praying with your child can be a great source of comfort and a way to express the sadness, anger and pain you are both feeling. If prayer isn't for you, time together in silence, listening to music or just being with one another is important. A shared moment helps you to support one another.

- If your child wants to, you should be ready to talk about the deceased – a favourite memory perhaps. You might find this very difficult but children often want to talk.

Be ready for a range of responses:

- Children's responses to death will often mirror your own: loss, anger, sadness and pain, but not always.
- Young children often appear to show almost no response to learning of death. This doesn't mean they don't care and you should not expect them to show visible signs of sadness. Never try to prompt children to respond to situations in ways that you expect.
- Sometimes the news doesn't sink in straight away and may take time to process.
- Sometimes they will have fully grasped the news and have strong feelings, without having the emotional literacy to know how to express them, especially if this is their first encounter with death, or if they didn't see the deceased when ill.
- Your child may appear fascinated with death, play-acting games in which someone dies or the deceased is still alive. They may ask repeatedly where their loved one is or when he or she is coming back (even though you have clearly told them what has happened). Your child might also show signs that they are worried about other family members dying and want to look after you or please you. They might be more clingy than usual. These are all normal signs that they are processing what has happened.

Support after the conversation:

- Have available some activities which you know your child enjoys. Doing something together gives space for discussion if your child wants it.
- Whatever you do together, however mundane, will be a source of comfort to your child (and to you).
- Playing a game, watching a favourite film, cooking a meal, some fresh air (if you are able to leave home safely) could all work well.
- If your child would prefer not to do something with you, look for other ways to provide that togetherness and reassurance. For example, you could read your own books in the same room or take a drink to them in their room. Keep the space open for dialogue if and when your child wants it. Let your child see that, whatever their reaction, your love for them is unconditional.
- Some children find talking about their grief very difficult, but they find writing, doodling or drawing helpful. Consider a special place in which your child can record their feelings (which they can either share with you or keep private, as appropriate).
- Make sure your child knows that the death is not their fault. Some children imagine that their actions (not being good enough, making the deceased cross, playing too roughly etc.) have caused the death.
- For some children, their anger will be overwhelming and they will struggle to manage their feelings. Consider ways you can help them to express their anger safely - pummelling a cushion, strenuous exercise, shouting loudly etc.
- However, difficult it may be for you, your child will appreciate normal routines and patterns returning as soon as possible. When a child loses a loved one, they often feel that their life is out of control and re-establishing routine can help with this.

There is no 'right' way:

- For most of us, having to talk about death with children is not something we are well equipped to do. Usually this is because, thankfully, it isn't something we have to do often.
- However, this means that you will probably be feeling uncertain and worried about getting it right.
- You will also be trying to process your own reaction and grief, which makes it harder.
- Don't worry about whether what you are doing is 'right'.
- Stick to the principles above: honesty, offering support, listening, reassurance, routine, finding answers to questions which you don't know, unconditional love.

Look after yourself:

- Supporting your child can be difficult when you not coping well yourself.
- Make sure you have someone supporting you too - a family member, a friend or a professional to talk to about your own feelings.
- Your local church will always be happy to provide a listening ear, whether or not you are not a regular churchgoer.

Online sources of support, guidance and advice:

Finding your local church minister to talk to: <https://www.achurchnearyou.com/>

Dealing with bereavement and grief: <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

Involving children in funerals: <https://www.churchofengland.org/life-events/funerals/after-funeral/journey-through-grief>

Supporting grieving children: <https://www.winstonswish.org/>