



End-of-life Information: Toddler (12 - 36 months) Series

Talking about death...

Someone close has died. Helping your child understand the changes your family has experienced, ensures that he feels safe and secure. Keeping it comfortable to talk about worries, fears and other feelings is the best way to do that.

As a parent, you:

- ♦ are usually the best judge of your child's needs
- ♦ may be experiencing your own intense grief
- ♦ may not have any previous experience explaining death to a child
- ♦ teach your child about grieving by the way you express your grief

Toddlers haven't matured enough to understand the abstract concept of death. They need simple, concrete explanations of what happened. Toddlers may show their reactions by:

- ♦ crying or asking about the person because they are no longer around
- ♦ using more body language or behaviour than words
- ♦ responding more to your body language, mood and behaviour than to your words
- ♦ using play to think about, and make sense of, what they have learned

Parents have found it useful to practice saying these difficult-to-say words before using them with their child.

- ♦ If your child asks why you are upset say, "I'm sad because your brother died. I miss him. But I won't always feel sad." or "I miss our baby. We were so happy he was going to be born." or "Moms and dads sometimes cry when they feel sad. It's okay to feel sad and cry. It won't always feel this way."
- ♦ It might help to use play to talk about it. If he says, "The bear is crying because his sister died." You could say, "Yes, I see that. I feel sad too. Do you?"
- ♦ Be aware of the words you use. Saying "Our baby went to sleep" or "We lost him" can be confusing to toddlers. He may fear sleeping or being lost too. Say, "Our baby died. His heart doesn't work anymore and he doesn't breathe anymore."
- ♦ If he asks, "Where is the baby?" say, "Her body is buried because it doesn't work anymore but....." Add your family's beliefs with very simple, concrete words. When he is older, he will be able to understand your beliefs more fully.
- ♦ Whenever they passed the hospital where a sibling died, the toddler said, "That's where my sister is but she died." The parent showed the child the ward and staff explained that the sister had been there but had died and wasn't there anymore. The toddler was satisfied with that concrete, simple answer.

This is a very difficult situation to explain and it is natural to wonder if the conversation went as well as you hoped it would. Your child will likely bring this topic up again over time, giving you an opportunity to respond in more detail as he matures. Building trust and openness early on with your child helps him to feel safe and secure with you when talking about sensitive issues.

