

Coronavirus (COVID-19) summary information:

Talking to children about the death of someone close

Compiled by the Educational Psychology Service with specific content from & signposting to:

<https://www.winstonswish.org>

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When talking to a child about the death of someone close, the language used, and the child's need for information and understanding, will vary according to their age and developmental stage and the specific cause of the death. However, the child's basic needs will always remain the same.

Although COVID-19 is a shocking new situation, general guidance on talking to children about the death of someone close holds true. Put simply this would be:

- Use simple, direct language appropriate to their level of understanding
- Use the terms 'died', 'dead', and 'death' – euphemisms such as 'we've lost Grandpa' or 'Grandma has gone to another place' are confusing. Children are helped to understand by hearing the language that fits this new experience
- Keep children informed about what has happened and what will happen (e.g. about the funeral)
- Check how much they have understood
- Answer questions openly. If you don't know an answer, say you will find out and come back to them. If you feel the answer is too difficult for them to hear, explain that honestly
- Repeat explanations more than once
- Reassure them that they are not to blame
- Allow and encourage the safe sharing of feelings and thoughts

- Listen to their feelings, worries, memories.

Ways to explain to a child that someone has died

Some suggested words:

"We know that all living things will die someday. Flowers, animals, trees, butterflies, people all die eventually..."

"... however, the great majority of people will die when they are very old."

"Occasionally, someone will die before they are old because, for example, of an accident or serious illness."

"When someone dies, their body stops working and they are no longer able to do the things they could when they were alive, such as move or talk or hug or play."

"Sadly, [name] has died. Everyone wishes they had not died and had lived for many more years. However, their body was not able to keep working and so they died. Their heart stopped beating, their lungs stopped breathing and their brain stopped thinking, and so they died."

"We are very healthy and we're going to do all we can to keep that way, because I want to be around to [achieve some future goal or activity]."

Explaining that someone has died through coronavirus

There are some complicating factors about deaths from COVID-19 that may affect children

Unpredictability: It's not only very old, very frail people who are dying. The person they know may have been a little frail before they contracted the virus or they may have appeared perfectly well.

Suddenness: People may sicken and die quite rapidly; children will have little time to adjust to a rapidly changing future.

Distance: Children won't be able to spend time with their dying relative, won't be able to touch or hug them or even be in the same room.

Fear: People may react to the news that this person had died with instinctive fear rather than instinctive comfort.

Separation: Children and young people will be physically distant from those who might support them – friends, teachers, wider family.

Support structures: The current disruption of normal routine may mean children and young people have fewer places in which to switch off and focus on something else: for example, school, sports club.

Anger: Children and young people may feel angry about things they perceive to have contributed to this death: people being slow to self-isolate, lack of ventilators etc.

Anxiety: While children and young people will worry about other family members dying after any death, in the present situation, such anxiety is sharper and less easy to soothe.

Lack of ‘specialness’: More and more people will be or will know someone affected by a death due to coronavirus. The death of a child’s important person won’t receive as much attention as before this crisis.

Constantly reminded: It will be hard for children to avoid hearing other stories of people affected by coronavirus.

Absence of rituals: With heavy restrictions on funerals, children and young people will have less chance to ‘say goodbye’ in a formal sense

Some of these factors can make it more complicated to talk about. For example, it will be harder to explain why their special person died, (when perhaps someone else with similar symptoms didn’t) as there is much still unknown about how the virus works. It may also feel harder to assure children that other people they know won’t die yet.

Telling a child that someone important has coronavirus

Hopefully there will be time, even if only a short time, to prepare a child for the news that someone important has coronavirus. Here are some guiding words:

“I have something important to tell you. [Name] has become ill, and s/he has the illness called ‘coronavirus’. S/he is feeling ill, has a bad cough and feels hot. The illness means that s/he needs to stay in hospital. We won’t be able to visit them for at least a week. Perhaps you’d like to draw a picture/make a card/send a message to let her/him know you’re thinking about them. The doctors and nurses are all working really hard to get [name] better and we’re all hoping that s/he will be well again soon.”

Telling a child or young person that someone they know has died through coronavirus

“I have something very sad and difficult to tell you. [Name] died. You remember I told you that s/he had this illness called ‘coronavirus’ and that everyone was doing all they could to make them better? Sadly, despite all that [name] and the doctors and nurses did, the illness became too strong and their body could not get better. Their lungs stopped working and their heart stopped beating and they died.”

You can read further guidance about supporting a child after a death through serious illness at <https://www.winstonswish.org/serious-illness/>

Talking to children about the death through coronavirus of other people/people they don't know

Children and young people will also be aware of people outside their family and circle of friends who have the virus and there will be people they have heard of who might die. This is likely to make children wonder about the safety of those close to them.

Acknowledging their anxiety is important, alongside realistic reassurance.

“It seems so shocking, doesn't it, that [name of public figure] has died from the coronavirus? I know we didn't know them, but it still feels very sad. I wanted to say that, here in this family, we are doing all the right things to avoid catching the virus. I know it can get dull sometimes but my job is to keep you safe and we'll do all we can to keep us all well.”

Balancing truth and reassurance

One continual challenge for parents and carers supporting children facing bereavement or those who have been bereaved is hitting the right mixture of truth and reassurance.

Children are expert at knowing if they are not being told the truth; if there are things that seem too difficult to share, explain that.

Equally, they will know the difference between genuine and false reassurance. Rather than saying “nobody we know is going to die”, maybe consider saying: “from all I've heard, it is extremely unlikely that anyone we know will die and we will do everything we can do to keep safe.”

Look after yourself

Super-parents or super-carers don't really exist. Simply doing the best you can at this time is all that your children need.

It is all right to not have all the answers and to feel your own anxieties during times of such uncertainty. Share your anxieties with other adults to help create space in your mind to listen to your children's concerns more objectively.

Take time to look after yourself.