

How to Talk  
to Children  
about

DEATH

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# Introduction

“How do I talk to my child about...?” This is not an uncommon question among parents as well as teachers and catechists. Abstract concepts, hard-to-broach subjects, and sensitive issues all require a particular kind of language that gives a child enough information without being overly complex or confusing. The same is true for many aspects of our faith.

This series of books provides parents as well as teachers and catechists with a range of questions about these topics. Each one offers terminology relatable to a young child’s experience as well as family activities to stimulate further conversation and comprehension. In sharing these responses, you are likely to find yourself more than capable of talking to your child about these and other topics of faith and practice.

# What does death mean?

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## **For your information**

Death is defined as “the cessation of all biological functions that sustain a living organism,” but we know there is more to the experience of death.

Death is relevant to everyone, yet it remains difficult to talk about. Discussing death with children begins with reflecting on your own attitudes and beliefs about death. Then you can help your child to identify feelings and to deal with them positively.

Faith assures us that death is not an end but the beginning of new life. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is the ultimate proof. You might use the analogy of birth to help your child. Have your child imagine trying to convince a baby to leave the comfort and nourishment of the womb. How could you convince the baby that leaving this “home” will be positive—a whole new world awaits, filled with beauty and amazing opportunities?

Are we as convinced that leaving this life is filled with the same wondrous experiences? That is the message we want our children to embrace and the gift that faith offers.

## **Talking to children about death**

It is important that death is seen as part of life. The earlier we refer to death the better—before a beloved person dies. Talk about the changing seasons and how leaves and flowers die. “What changes do you see in the world as a season begins?” What dies in winter will have new life when spring comes.

Your child may ask about what it means to die. You might use words like, “When a person dies, the body no longer moves or feels pain. It is the spirit—or soul—of the person that lives on.

The body will be reunited with the spirit when Jesus comes at the end of time.” Of course, body and soul are difficult concepts for young children. It may help to talk about the qualities a person had—“Aunt Mae was so loving and generous—that’s her spirit that lives on.”

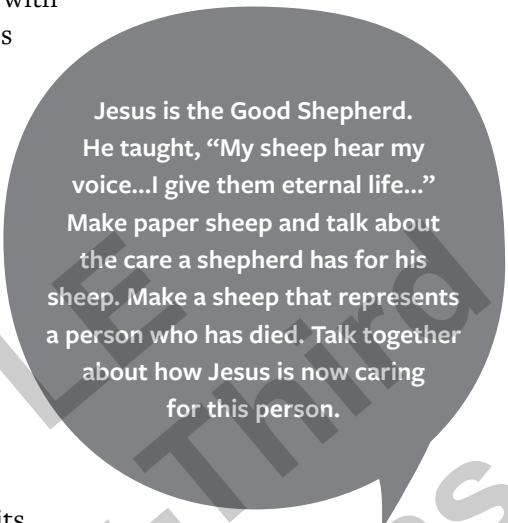
Talking about heaven can help children begin to grasp the new life that awaits. Explain that Jesus lives in heaven. Talk together about what it might be like to be with Jesus in heaven.

Children will most likely hear about death before someone close dies. They may hear something on the news or tell you about a teacher or crossing guard who died. You might ask, “Do you know what happened?” “What do you remember about \_\_\_\_\_?” “How do you feel about losing this person?” If it is someone you know as well, you could share your feelings too. “\_\_\_\_\_ was always so kind. I am sad to hear she died.” You might ask, “What do you think she is doing now in heaven?”

Depending on your child’s age, you might consider attending the wake or funeral of a person they knew before someone really close dies. This exposes a child to the rituals that surround death before they experience losing someone close.

### **Pray together**

*Jesus, Good Shepherd, you care for us. We are sad when someone dies. But you promise we will all live in heaven with you one day. We pray that all who die will enjoy heaven forever.*



Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He taught, “My sheep hear my voice...I give them eternal life...” Make paper sheep and talk about the care a shepherd has for his sheep. Make a sheep that represents a person who has died. Talk together about how Jesus is now caring for this person.

# How do we experience loss?

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## **For your information**

Death can come from illness or old age, an accident or act of violence; it may be a suicide. Each of these ways can challenge our faith and seem unbearable. Healing may come slowly.

The death of a loved one is a great loss. But there are “little losses” that can help prepare us. You might lose a favorite recipe or a job. Your child might lose a favorite toy or have a failure in school.

Even “little losses” can begin a grief process. Author Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified five stages to grieving that help to identify feelings: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Think of a “little loss” you have experienced. Did you deny it even happened? “I know that recipe is here someplace.” Were you angry? “Someone took it!” Did you bargain? “If I can find it, I promise I’ll make it for my sick neighbor.” Were you sad? “I just won’t cook anymore, what’s the point?” Did you accept the loss? “Maybe I can find a similar one online.”

Helping your child to understand the feelings with small losses can help them to navigate the great losses.

## **Talking to children about loss and grief**

When your child experiences a “little loss”—a friend moves away, a failure at school, or a team loss—use it as an opportunity to discuss loss. “I can tell something happened. Do you want to talk about it?” If the child is reticent to talk, share a “little loss” of your own that might be similar. Recall your own experience of being

Death can evoke many different feelings.  
With your child, draw a happy face. Then ask,  
“What feelings might we have when we lose someone?”  
Help your child to draw a sad face, an angry face,  
a peaceful face, and a confused face. Point to the face  
that shows how you are feeling. Ask your child,  
“Can you point to the one that shows how you are feeling?”  
Help your child to talk about getting to the peaceful face.  
Talk together about things that can help us  
feel better when we are sad or upset.

overlooked when it came to a job or being part of a team. Tell how you felt—perhaps angry at first and then sad.

If the child doesn't want to talk, say, “I understand you don't want to talk right now. You can tell me about it when I tuck you in tonight.” Listen as the child expresses feelings. Affirm the child's right to such feelings—even when the loss seems insignificant. You might say, everyone has feelings and not always happy ones. Remind your child that Jesus had feelings too—he got angry at the money changers in the temple, he cried when his friend Lazarus died, and he was sad in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus understands and we can talk to him about our grief.

### **Pray together**

(invite your child to fill in the words) *Jesus, you know I feel*  
\_\_\_\_\_. *I know you love me no matter what. Please help me*  
*when I am* \_\_\_\_\_.

# What can we do when someone is dying?

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## **For your information**

If someone is dying, express it in those terms. Using other words like “going to sleep” or “going away” or “passing away” can confuse the child or cause issues later. Acknowledge your child’s response to the situation. Allow your child to take the lead in how much you share. Answer questions as honestly as you can.

Recognize your feelings and take care of yourself. We are not equipped to help a child if we are in denial or stressed and tired. When a close relative is dying, you might engage another person in helping your child to be a part of what is happening in the family. Be sure they know it is okay to talk with your child about the person who is dying.

Allow your grief to show. Crying can be healing for you and your child. Sharing a favorite story of the dying person can help your child to open up. Share a photo of the person and ask your child what they would say to the person or what they remember about the person.

## **Talking to children about what to do when someone is dying**

Each of us grieves in our own way. Your child may want to know a lot or nothing much. Just be attentive and include the child as much as possible. If visiting is possible, invite your child to go. “Auntie is very sick. Would you like to go with me to visit her?” If your child cannot go or is not allowed, suggest making a card. “Since cousin \_\_\_\_\_ is in the hospital, let’s make a card to remind him we love him.”

One way to make a bereavement card is to outline your child's hands on paper and have your child color them. Tell your child it's a hug on paper they can send. Or take a photo of your child to bring when you visit those mourning the loss.

Then ask, "What would you like me to say to \_\_\_\_\_ when I bring the photo?"

When death is imminent, prepare your child. "The doctor said Auntie may die soon. We will miss her, but she will go to heaven." Wait for any questions your child may have and answer them honestly but age-appropriately. Do not be afraid to say, "I don't know." A child may ask when the person will die or why the doctors can't fix the person. "I am asking that question too. We just don't know. But we know that her pain will be over and she will be in heaven."

Assure your child of God's love for the person. "God loves \_\_\_\_\_ and we can pray that God will give her comfort, like I do when you are sick." Sometimes children are more attuned to God's love than we adults are. God's love may mean our loved one will get better, or our loved one will die. "No matter what happens, we know God will care for her."

### **Pray together**

*Lord Jesus, we pray that you will take care of \_\_\_\_\_ .  
May our loved one and all people who are dying feel your love.*