

# What Do I Tell the Children?

This is a very difficult time for you and your family. Sometimes it is hard to find the right words to say when talking to children about death. It is okay for your child to see you sad. It lets them know they are not alone.

It is important to be honest with children about illness, injury, death, and dying. This is true for young children, too. Parents often hope to protect their children from sad news. However, children usually know when their families are avoiding serious topics. They may see it in body language and facial expressions. They may hear adults talking to each other. For many adults, telling a child that their loved one is dead feels difficult and overwhelming.



When children are not told what is happening, they may feel anxious and worried. They may wonder what is so bad that everyone is talking about it, but no one will talk to them. Their imagination may fill in the gaps in ways that feed their fears. Many children may worry that the sadness or anger they see is their fault. This can leave children feeling confused, guilty, or ashamed.

Use the words “dead” and “dying.”  
Avoid misleading phrases, like  
“gone away” or “sleeping.”

Avoid vague or misleading words. When a child hears “she is sleeping,” they might think they can wake the person up. They may feel scared to go to sleep, thinking they might die, too. “Gone away,” “left us,” or “gone to a better place,” can confuse children, too. Use the words “death,” “dead,” and “dying.” Explain what these words mean. “*Dead means that a person is no longer alive. They do not eat, sleep, feel, breath, or play. Dead is forever.*” Give your child time to hear and process what is being said. Offer to repeat it to help them understand. Check to see if your child understands. Ask them to explain it back to you in their own words.

When sharing religious beliefs with children, be careful about what words you use. Young children have very concrete thinking. For example, “*She was so good that God took her to heaven.*” Young children may wonder what is wrong with them that God does not want them, too. Or they may misbehave for fear that God will take them if they are “too good.”

## Resources:

- [www.cscrochester.org](http://www.cscrochester.org)
- [www.campgooddays.org](http://www.campgooddays.org)
- Camp Heartstrings Camp Dreams (<https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/home-care/hospice-care/camp-heartstrings.aspx>)
- Talking about Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child by Earl Grollman