

How do I explain death so that children understand?

Be honest, open and age appropriate

Work to maintain continuity in school and family life

Keep on answering questions until children feel confident that they understand

Distinguish between death and other types of absence

- eg. sleep refreshes, death is final
- Some absences are temporary, death is permanent

Deliberately hiding the facts surrounding the circumstances of a death, or avoiding talking about a death around children, may lead to confusion, worry and even mistrust

Talk with children about any guilt / anger and related feelings

Allow repeated questions and conversations to give the child time to understand

Explain the physical changes of death

Link the death to previous experience, such as death of a pet

Reduce confusion by avoiding euphemisms. For example:

Emphasise that we don't stop loving someone when they die – that's why it hurts so much

- saying that the person is sleeping may lead to fear of sleeping, in case they don't wake up
- saying God took the person because they were good may make children fear being good, or feel that they weren't good enough
 - Talk of being 'taken' may be scary
- Saying the person is in a better place may make the child want to go there too, or give the
- impression that the person chose to leave them

Emphasise that the illness was serious – not something common like a cold —so that children are not scared of small illnesses

Avoid unnecessary separations to reduce anxiety

Make the Loss Real

- Let children participate in a memorial or other rituals
 - Be open about your own feelings
- Keep reminders of the person who has died