

How To... Explain Death to Youth

Strategies for Youth has been asked by several officers for advice on talking to youth about death. Many officers deal with death routinely and are faced with the impossible task of breaking the news to youth that their siblings, cousins, friends, and parents are dead.

What's the best way to do it? Should you be direct? Should you use euphemisms? Officers asked for the words to say it in a way that is developmentally appropriate.

Strategies for Youth spoke with psychologists, psychiatrists and police trainers from around the country and developed the below chart to help officers consider what to say and how to say it depending on the youth's age. Strategies for Youth invites you to print out and share this chart, and to send us any approaches you have found effective in your work.

	PSYCHOLOGICAL/ DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS	PERCEPTION OF DEATH	EXAMPLE OF WORDS TO USE
TODDLER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Importance of parent-child bonding Need to be as close physically as feasible Opportunity to express independence Need for consistency in daily routine Reassurance of future expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear of separations Don't understand death is permanent 	<p>Allow toddler to see how family grieves:</p> <p>"Tim will not be seeing you anymore. He is dead and it's okay to feel lots of different things. It's okay to talk about what you are feeling, too."</p>
PRESCHOOL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to prepare for separation Offer appropriate support and clarification Continuation of normal patterns for daily living Contact with security object Allow child to play Give as many choices as practical but not outside of what would have happened prior to death Take cues from child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often see death as violent Don't always see death as permanent Death is a punishment for being bad Death is confused with separation and sleep Believe their thoughts/actions can cause someone to die 	<p>"Sara won't be coming back."</p> <p>Talk openly, honestly, and clearly</p> <p>Use words such as "dead" and "died"</p> <p>Explain death without using figurative expressions, such as "he has gone to heaven"</p> <p>[Be sensitive to whether this is a faith-based family.]</p>

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How To... Explain Death to Youth (CONT.)

	PSYCHOLOGICAL/ DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS	PERCEPTION OF DEATH	EXAMPLE OF WORDS TO USE
SCHOOL-AGE	<p>Needs honest explanation</p> <p>Fear of loss of control</p> <p>More detailed explanation but at a pace the child sets- provide clear, simple, direct answers to questions</p> <p>Just because they are not asking it doesn't mean that they aren't thinking it, but also is not sign that they need to be told</p> <p>If a parent/caregiver doesn't know the answer it is okay to say "I don't know but will find out"</p> <p>Need for parental involvement</p> <p>Still need to maintain same schedule and rules; stress importance of keeping as much normalcy as possible</p>	<p>Begin to understand the finality of death</p> <p>Death becomes more real, final, universal, and inevitable</p> <p>Differentiation of living and non-living</p> <p>Death is frightening and painful</p> <p>Begin to understand and feel that others are sad and that there is a gradient to who is sad</p>	<p>"Jack is dead."</p> <p>"John's body stopped working."</p> <p>"It's okay to have lots of different feelings and to want to ask questions. It's also okay if you don't want to talk about it."</p>
ADOLESCENCE	<p>Begins to deal with issues of illness/injury</p> <p>Relies less on family support</p> <p>Illness/injury may impair ability to plan future</p> <p>Need for privacy</p> <p>Detailed explanation</p> <p>Need for peers</p> <p>Participation in decision-making</p>	<p>Able to acknowledge fragility of life</p> <p>Death may be viewed as philosophical problem in life</p> <p>Understand death as final and unavoidable</p>	<p>"Jessica died."</p> <p>"Do you have any questions about how/why she died?"</p> <p>Important to be truthful</p> <p>Give teen opportunity to ask questions</p> <p>Do not treat teen like a child</p>