

What to expect at this age

By Mary VanClay

Death is one of the hardest subjects to broach with young children, especially when you're struggling to deal with your own sorrow. But death is also an inescapable part of life, and children want to understand it and find ways to grieve that feel natural.

Preschoolers are aware of death from early on. They hear about it in fairy tales, see it on TV, and encounter dead bugs, birds, or squirrels on the sidewalk or roadside. Some children may have already experienced the death of a pet or a family member. Despite this, there are aspects of death that kids this age still can't understand. For example, they can't grasp that death is permanent, inevitable, and happens to everyone, explains Michael Towne, a child-life specialist who works with grieving families at the University of California-San Francisco Medical Center. Nor can they comprehend that being dead means that the body no longer functions. They may believe that the deceased still eat, sleep, and do normal things — except that they do them up in the sky or down in the ground. No matter how many times you explain it, preschoolers can't really understand what causes death, and they may think of it as something that's temporary and reversible. Even when a parent or a sibling has died, preschoolers often don't see death as something that can happen to *them*.

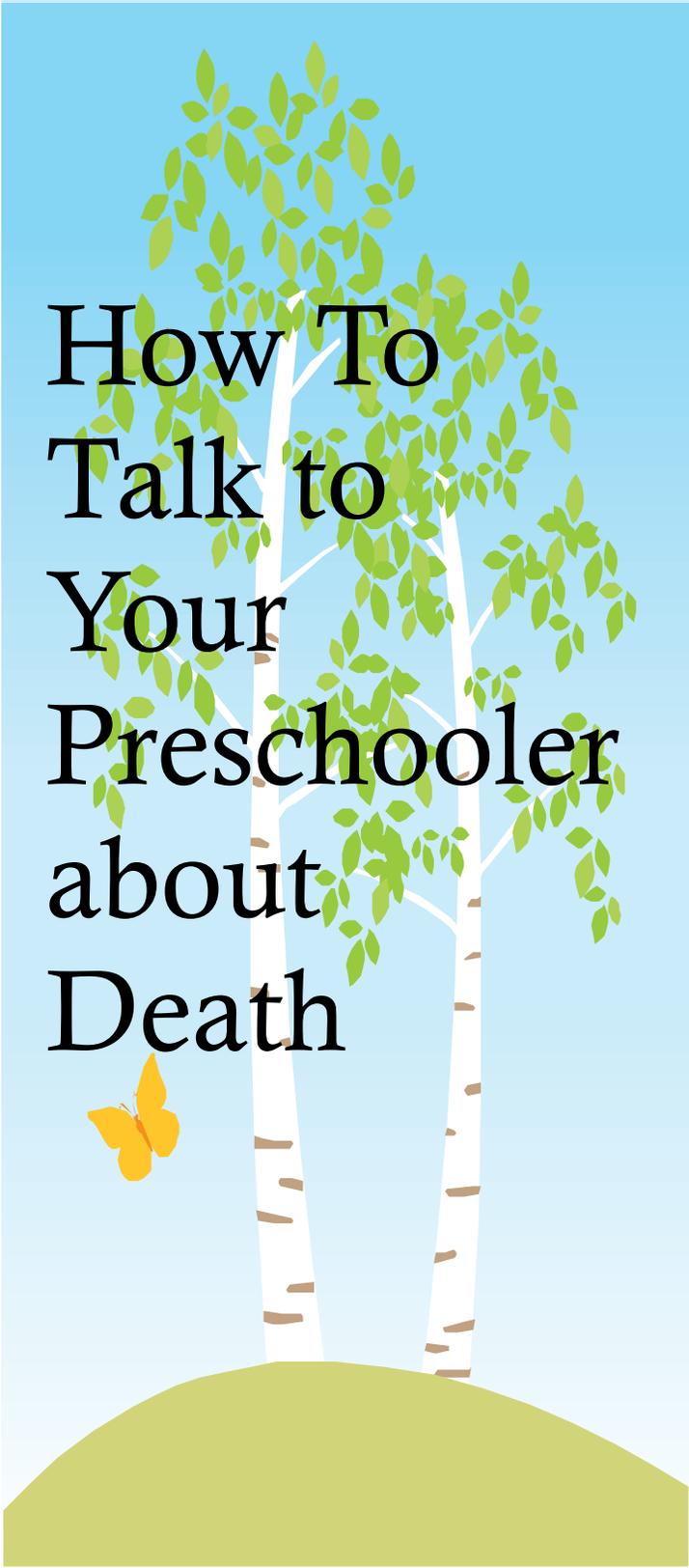
Kids this age react to death in a variety of ways. Don't be surprised if your child becomes clingy, reverts to baby talk, or suddenly balks at going to her familiar preschool. After all, her daily routines may have been interrupted, she's struggling to understand why the adults around her are so sad, and the world may suddenly seem ominous to her in a way that it hadn't before. On the other hand, she may not show any reaction to the death at all, or her responses may be intermittent, mixed in with her usual cheerfulness and play. This is normal, too. Children process grief in bite-sized chunks, not all at once. And many delay grieving until they feel it's safe to let those feelings out — a process that could take months or even years, particularly if they've lost a parent or a sibling.

Your preschooler may also engage in behaviors that seem odd to you, such as playing dead. This too is normal, even if it strikes you as morbid, so don't discourage this important way for her to work through her feelings about death.



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How To Talk to Your Preschooler about Death

How to explain death to your preschooler

Don't dodge her questions. It's normal for your preschooler to be curious about death, even if she hasn't yet lost a loved one. In fact, less emotionally fraught times are good opportunities for laying groundwork that will help your child cope when she *does* lose someone. Answer her questions about death, and don't be afraid to read stories about children whose pets or grandparents die.

Give brief, simple answers. Young children can't handle too much information at once. At this age, it's most helpful to explain death in terms of physical functions that have ceased, rather than launching into a complicated discussion of a particular illness: "Now that Uncle John has died, his body has stopped working. He can't walk or run, or eat or sleep or see anymore, and he doesn't feel any pain." It's also important to help a preschooler understand basics such as who's going to take care of her. "She thinks, 'If Mom dies, who's going to give me my bath?' " says grief specialist Michael Towne.

Express your own emotions. Grieving is an important part of healing, for both children and adults. Don't frighten your child with excessive grief, but don't make the subject off-limits, either. Explain that grownups need to cry sometimes, too, and that you feel sad because you miss Grandma. Your preschooler is keenly aware of changes in your mood, and she'll be even more worried if she senses that something is wrong but that you're trying to hide it.

Avoid euphemisms. Common adult phrases for death — "resting in peace," "in eternal sleep" — are confusing for a young child, so don't say that Grandpa is "sleeping" or "has gone away." Your preschooler may worry that going to bed at night means she'll die, too, or that if you leave for the office or the store, you won't come back. State the reasons for the death as simply as possible: "Grandpa was very, very old and his body couldn't work any more." If Grandpa was sick before he died, be sure to reassure your child that if she gets sick from a cold or flu, it doesn't mean she'll die. Explain that there are different ways people get sick, and that we recover from minor illnesses like the ones your child usually has.



Tread carefully when discussing God and heaven. Explanations of death and the afterlife will of course depend on your own religious beliefs. If the concepts of God and heaven will enter into your conversation, think carefully about what you'll say, since words meant to comfort a small child may actually confuse her. If you tell your preschooler, "Janie's happy now, because she's in heaven," for instance, she may worry: How can Janie really be happy if everyone around me is so sad? If you say, "Janie was so good that God wanted her with him," she's likely to think: If God wanted to take Janie, will he take me too? Should I be good so I can be with her in heaven, or bad so I can stay here with Mom and Dad? Something along the lines of, "We're so sad that Janie isn't here with us and we'll miss her very much, but it's comforting to know that she's with God now," will reassure your child without adding to her worries.



Be prepared for a variety of reactions. Children not only feel sorrow over the death of a loved one, they may also feel guilt or anger. Reassure your preschooler that nothing she said or did caused the death, and don't be surprised if she expresses anger toward you, the doctors and nurses, or even the deceased. Also expect that she may have tantrums more often, either as a way to get her own sadness out (though the tantrum may appear to be about something else) or as a reaction to the tension and sadness in your household.

Expect the subject to come up repeatedly. Be ready to field the same questions from your child over and over again, since understanding the permanence of death is a struggle for her. She's also likely to come up with new questions as her awareness of death and her cognitive skills grow, grief counselors say. Don't worry that you didn't explain the death adequately the first time — your child's ongoing questions are normal. Just keep answering them as patiently as you can.

Memorialize the deceased. Children need concrete ways to mourn the death of a loved one. At this age, your preschooler probably isn't ready to attend a funeral (particularly an open-casket wake), but she can light a candle at home, sing a song, draw a picture, or take part in some other ritual observance. It also helps to talk about the good relationship she had with the person who died: "Remember when you and Grandma went blueberry picking? She had so much fun with you."

Don't downplay the death of a pet. This is many children's first brush with death, and it can be a deeply tragic event for them. A family dog or cat is often a child's first and best playmate, offering unconditional love and companionship. Feeding the parakeet or goldfish regularly may have made her feel proud and grown up. Try not to say, "Don't feel bad, Rover is in heaven now" — this teaches her that her very real sadness is inappropriate. Instead, offer her lots of sympathy for her loss, and expect the same kinds of ongoing mourning and repeated questions that you'd get if a person she cared for had died.

Help her respond to media coverage of death. Your child may still be somewhat oblivious to the widely publicized deaths of media figures or to news coverage of national disasters or wars. But she *will* pick up on the fact that you're sad or anxious, and she's also likely to hear older children discussing these events. Reassure her that "people are angry and fighting far away," and that that makes you sad, but that you're there to take care of her and will do everything you can to keep her safe.



Do your best to get your preschooler's life back to "normal." Don't compound your child's loss by abandoning the schedule and activities that anchor her life and give her a sense of security. Some schedule upset is to be expected, of course, but the sooner your preschooler's routine gets back to normal, the easier it will be for her. She needs to get to bed on time, get up on time, eat meals on time, and, if she's in nursery school, go back to the friends and fun she has there.

Don't try to be perfect. If you're deeply bereaved by a recent death, do your best to guide your child through the difficult times, but don't expect yourself to be perfect. It's all right to cry in front of your child, and you can't expect yourself to answer every question perfectly the first time. Ask for help from friends and relatives, and remember that the more you help *yourself* cope, the better you'll be able to help your child cope, both now and later.

Please see www.babycenter.com for more information on this topic.

