

## Questions about Death: What 2-year-olds ask and how to answer them.

By Mary VanClay

When questions about death come up, either because someone close to your child has died or he's struggling to understand the concept, you may be stumped about how best to respond. There are no "perfect" answers — the most important thing is to answer your child's queries as patiently, simply, and gently as possible and to understand that his concerns and reactions will be different from yours. Expect to have to repeat your answers over and over again, and provide plenty of reassurance that you're there to love and care for him. (If, on the other hand, your child hasn't yet expressed curiosity about death, it's better to hold off on your discussion until he does). Here, some of kids' most common questions about death, plus guidance for answering them in a way that 2-year-olds will understand:

**"What does 'dead' mean?"** "It means a person or animal stops breathing and his or her body doesn't work anymore. They don't eat or sleep or feel cold or hot. Plants die too — every living thing does. Usually people and animals only die when they've grown very old."

**"When will you die?"** Children often ask questions that seem shocking or callous to adults. What your child really means is, "Will I still be taken care of?" Even if he doesn't ask outright, it's wise to anticipate worries about how stable his life will be: "I want you to know that I plan to be here until I'm very, very old and you're all grown up."

**"Why is Aunt Sally crying?"** If you've just explained that Uncle John died, such a question may seem strange. But your child's understanding of death is so limited that he needs help understanding the emotions of those around him: "Uncle John died and he won't come back, and Aunt Sally is crying because she misses him very much."

**"When will Grandpa come back? Will he be here for my birthday?"** Although you've explained the death seemingly endless times, remember that your child can't grasp its permanence. Explain as gently and patiently as you can, "No, remember that Grandpa died and he can't come back. He won't be here for your birthday, but we'll remember the times he *was* here."

**"Can Grandma get a new Grandpa now?"** Because adults can often fix or replace things in our daily lives, children may wonder about replacing the deceased — especially if they have friends with step-grandparents. Gently give him the facts: "If she wants to, Grandma might get married again someday. But her new husband wouldn't be the same as Grandpa. Grandpa died and can't come back."

**"Was it my fault?"** Chances are, your child won't actually ask this out loud, but he may wonder about it. Two-year-olds are all ego, and they believe that their actions and thoughts affect those around them. Feelings of guilt are common and worth anticipating, so give him reassurance even if he never vocalizes such thoughts: "I want you to know that the baby in my tummy died because he wasn't healthy. There was nothing any of us did to make that happen."

**"Did Uncle John die because he did something bad?"** Try to make sure your child never equates death with punishment: "No, definitely not. Your uncle died in a car crash that was a terrible accident, but it wasn't his fault that he died, and it wasn't because he did anything bad."

**"I remember Daddy used to snuggle with me when I was a baby."** If your child shares memories that he clearly can't really have, don't correct him. This just means the lost loved one is real to him, and stories like this bring him a tremendous amount of comfort.

Please see [www.babycenter.com](http://www.babycenter.com) for more on this topic





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