**EXPLAINING DEATH TO A CHILD/YOUNG PERSON**

Telling a child someone has died may be the hardest thing you ever do and often one of the first questions is ‘how much should I tell them?’ It’s normal to worry about making things worse by saying too much or the wrong thing but remember the worst has already happened. Our team at Winston’s Wish are on hand to help guide you through and suggest some gentle and caring ways in which to approach telling a child that someone they love has died.

Often adults want to protect children from death and it’s normal to think that children need to be shielded. However, in reality children are very aware and will pick up when something as enormous as a death has occurred.

**Use clear language when telling a child someone has died**

It’s better to use clear and direct language with children. Use the words ‘died’ and ‘dead’ rather than ‘passed away’ or ‘lost’ when telling them. These terms can lead to confusion, especially in younger children who may wonder if they can go and find a person who is now ‘lost’.

From our experience, it is better to be open, honest and direct when a loved one has died. In the absence of clear information children tend to ‘fill in the gaps’ to try and make sense of what is happening. This can mean that children imagine all sorts of things about a death, which are often worse than the reality.

**Build up information like a jigsaw when explaining**

You don’t need to give children all of the information in one go. When telling a child someone has died it’s best to give them information in smaller chunks that are more manageable and build it up like a jigsaw.

For example, very young children start to build puzzles with just a few blocks and for them ‘Mummy has died’ and ‘it’s really sad’ might be enough to begin with. As they develop and get older children will require more information to make sense of the puzzle. For example, you might explain how a person has died and could say ‘Mummy’s heart stopped working which meant her body became broken’.

**Let them ask questions about what happened**

If children are older it is also important to ask them how much information they would like to receive, for example, ‘would you like to know what happened at the hospital?’.

Letting children know they can ask more questions in the future is also important, this tells them that they can rely on the adults around them to provide the truth at a confusing time. Even if you do not know the answers immediately you can reassure children and let them know you’ll try to find out.

It’s not uncommon for young children to ask lots of repetitive questions. This doesn’t mean they haven’t listened or that you haven’t explained it well enough. This is just how children work out what’s going on.

**Ways to explain to a child that someone has died**

Some suggested words:

*“We know that all living things will die someday. Flowers, animals, trees, butterflies, people all die eventually…”*

*“… however, the great majority of people will die when they are very old.”*

*“Occasionally, someone will die before they are old because, for example, of an accident or serious illness.”*

*“When someone dies, their body stops working and they are no longer able to do the things they could when they were alive, such as move or talk or hug or play.”*

*“Sadly, [name] has died. Everyone wishes they had not died and had lived for many more years. However, their body was not able to keep working and so they died. Their heart stopped beating, their lungs stopped breathing and their brain stopped thinking, and so they died.”*

*“We are very healthy and we’re going to do all we can to keep that way, because I want to be around to [play with my great grandchildren/travel to Mars/celebrate the year 2100].”*

**How to explain death to a child**

Death can be a difficult concept for children to understand and it can be equally difficult to know how to begin to explain it. Children understand death differently at each stage of development.

Explaining death to a young child can be easier if you first help them understand the idea of ‘living’ and ‘alive’. Identifying the differences between living and dead is easier if you find examples in nature to show children. Start by spotting living things together and talk about what the see – are there particular movements or noises? You can explain that these are signs of being alive.

Encourage the child to think about other things that happen when you are alive, such as a heart that is beating and a brain that is thinking. This can help them make connections to humans. Ask the child to think about what else shows that we are alive – perhaps the way we move or do things.

Now, find dead insects and ask a child to see what they aren’t doing compared to the living ones. This can help them understand the different between alive and dead. You can then explain that their heart is no longer beating and their brain is no longer working and these things mean that they are dead and cannot come back. This helps them understand that the creature is not asleep.

It’s important for children to understand the life cycle and that everyone will change from being alive to being dead at some point, but that most people die when they are older. Some children can worry that something they did or said has caused a death. So explaining to a child that our thoughts or words won’t cause somebody to die can help.