



How to talk to children about voluntary assisted dying

This information sheet is for parents and caregivers who are talking with children about voluntary assisted dying.

Key points include

- When death becomes a certainty, it is important to have conversations with your child to prepare them.
- Consider if you would like your child or if your child expresses their wish to be present for the death and after-death rituals and share with them age-appropriate information about what to expect.
- Where you can, allow your child as much time as possible to process what is happening, encourage support prior and invite them to ask as many questions as they need to.
- Grief is not linear and can reappear throughout the child's life at different developmental stages.
- Both children and adolescents need loving adults in their life to share knowledge with them, spend time with them, and offer a safe space where questions can be asked and truthful answers provided.

How to have hard conversations with children about death

When death becomes a certainty, it is important to have conversations with your child to prepare them. Conversations about death and dying can be hard, and you may feel emotional when talking with your child about these topics. It is okay to express these feelings during your conversation (i.e. tears). It will help your child understand if you explain your feelings to them. Modelling healthy expressions of big feelings when talking with your child will allow them to feel safe and welcomed to do the same with you when they need to.

Provide a good foundation to talk about death by explaining to your child the physical elements of how a body works and what it needs in order to work properly. You can start this conversation by explaining that when a body does not have essential needs met, it cannot continue to live. Draw on your child's previous encounters with death (such as the death of a pet, snail, ant or bird), as this can help their understanding. Explain that death occurs when the body no longer breathes or moves and the person cannot talk, smile or touch you, although your child can still talk to them and touch them.

Depending on the age of your child, you might share different levels of detail with them.

- **For very young children (5 years and under)**, try to focus on feelings they understand, such as sad and afraid, and explain things in simple language. Children of this age tend to think in concrete ways and are still learning how concepts fit together. At this age children often think something they did has caused this bad thing to happen. They may need reassurance that this is not their fault.
e.g. *“Grandpa is very sick, and his body won’t get better. Grandpa will die soon. That means his body will stop working.”*
- **For school-aged children (6 to 12 years)**, you can add more detail about death, pain, illness and dying. Children of this age have greater capacity to absorb and understand new information, and can make sense of more complex situations.
e.g. *“Grandpa has cancer. Cancer is sick cells inside the body. The doctors have tried lots of medicine’s to make him better but unfortunately they have not worked. Do you remember when our dog Gracie died and we couldn’t see her anymore or play with her? When Grandpa dies, his body will stop working, and we won’t be able to see him anymore or play with him”.*
- **For teenagers**, you can add even more detail, and let them guide the learning process with their own questions. Consider what is appropriate for your child – you know them best. Be prepared for your teenager to struggle with reconnecting with family life at this time. Teenagers are often spending more time outside the family home and learning to find their place in the world and the pull of returning to the family space can be tough for them.

Once your child has an age-appropriate understanding of death, pain, illness progression, and deterioration, it might be a suitable time to explain their important person’s decision around voluntary assisted dying.

What you can do

- Remember that children are egocentric in their understanding of life and the world.
- They may make assumptions about what is happening and assume they did something to cause their important person to make this decision.
- Reaffirm to your child they did not cause this and invite any questions they may have, providing reassurance that this is no-ones fault.
- Listen closely and gauge the level of their understanding before you provide explanations to match their level.
- Explain that their important person loves them (if a true reflection), and does not want to leave them, but they have an illness or disease that will cause their body to die no matter what. What they are choosing is how, when and where this will happen.
- Let your child know that this is not a one-off conversation, and that they can ask questions at any time.

Practical considerations around death

Deciding if your child should be present for the death can be difficult. There is no right or wrong option. Before making your decision, have a conversation with your child about what they would like to do. Take time to consider the wishes of your loved one, the individual needs of your child, and their understanding around the death.

If you decide together that your child will be present, it is important to prepare them as much as you can for what will happen. If they will not be present, there are many ways they can be with their loved one, such as a phone or video call, a letter, card or message, making them something or to spend some time with them before they die.

What you can do

- In age-appropriate ways, let them know what they will see, hear, and smell. Describe to your child who else will be present (family, medical staff, friends, religious personnel) and that this will be the last time they will be able to see and talk to their important person in their body. If you are not sure what will happen, the WA VAD Care Navigator Service can talk this through with you first.
- Explain the person dying may or may not be awake for a short time before their body slows down and stops.
- Let your child know that the person may have periods of sleeping and being still, and their body might become cold to touch and change colour because their body is 'shutting down like a computer' or 'turning off like a phone'. Explain that the person will stop breathing and their heart will stop beating, which means they have died.
- Explain that there can often be quiet or hush after someone dies, and the other people in the room might release emotions such as sadness through tears. There may also be laughter and sharing of memories about the person.
- Consider who could be a trusted adult for your child and let them know they can go to them if needed, particularly if you are primary support for the person dying and may not be available for your child. Communicate to your child that this trusted adult will be there the whole time, and they can ask to leave the room if they would like.
- Remind your child that you love them and you know that it might be confusing for them.
- If your family has any spiritual or cultural practices around death or with the body after death occurs, explain what these might look like.
- Give your child a choice to touch the body once death has occurred, though be mindful not to force or pressure them to 'say goodbye' or touch the body if they choose not to.
- If you and your child decide they will not be present, consider giving them a simple explanation of what might take place.
- Give your child an opportunity to work out how they would like to say goodbye to their important person, if they choose (i.e. a letter, spending time with them before the death, making them something to have with them, taking a photo or make a video with them before they die). Invite any questions they may have and check for their understanding before providing clarification.
- Provide reassurance that it is OK to feel angry, sad, upset or confused and to feel different things at the same time. These feelings are natural, they do not need to go through this alone and it's OK to talk with you about this.

What to expect post-death

After the death has occurred, follow your child's lead in continuing the conversation around death and what happens after a person dies.

There is no right or wrong around the child attending or being involved in any post-death events. Consider the individual needs of your child and what they understand about the situation as you decide on their involvement.

What you can do

- Let them know about your own spiritual and cultural beliefs and what rituals might occur following the death.
- Explain what plans you have for a viewing of the body, such as a funeral, memorial, burial, cremation, or wake. Explain what they can expect to happen at each of these if they will be attending.
- Ask your child if they would like to draw or write something to put in the coffin or to be cremated with them (if appropriate for your cultural context), but do not pressure them to do so.
- Allow time for your child to process everything that has happened. Children sometimes engage in pretend play and may act out deaths or funerals. Don't be alarmed if this occurs. It is a healthy and normal way for them to process what has happened. Seek to check in periodically with your child, check for their understanding (in their own words) what has happened and if they have any questions.
- Let your child know that although their important person has died and is no longer physically here, they are still an important part of their life, and they can still talk about them, and their memories of them, at any time. Consider finding age-appropriate story books that capture the idea of continued connections to the person who has died, such as *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst, and *When Dinosaurs Die* by Laurie Krasny Brown.

Understanding grief

Pending grief, or anticipatory grief, is knowing that a change (death) is coming and experiencing grief in anticipation of that change. Where someone has chosen to proceed with voluntary assisted dying, anticipatory grief can become very real for those around them.

Allow your child some time to process your conversation around death, and invite them to ask any questions they may have. Give your child options of ways to express their emotions, or their connection to the person who is dying. Children often process their emotions through art, imaginative play and role playing, and your child may want to draw a picture or write a letter to the person who is dying. Again, do not pressure them to do so if they decide not to.

No matter how much time has passed, grief can continue to impact children and adults alike. Grief is not finite or linear, and can reappear throughout your child's life at different developmental stages.

A child may re-grieve the death of their important person again and again in different ways as their understanding of death, and life without that person, emerges at different ages. Different events (such as birthdays and anniversaries) or seasons in life may also trigger the intensity of their grief throughout their life.

Throughout it all, it is important to promote open communication about death and grief rather than discourage conversations about it. It can be helpful to continue to talk about and share memories of the person who has died, no matter how much time has passed.

Make space for grief. Acknowledge it, express it, and share it.

How to support a child through grief

Grief can be a whirlwind of intense emotions that are often difficult for children to express or define in words. Children's grief will be expressed differently based on their age, developmental stage and past experience. They may begin to understand the permanence of death and that their important person is not coming back.

How children express grief

- Children may have a lot of questions about death, and these might be very literal (dead bodies, funerals, the afterlife) and can initially be confronting to answer
- Children may act out behaviourally or become withdrawn
- Children may focus on what feels safe to them, such as school or a sporting achievement or people pleasing
- Children may have big emotional responses to everyday occurrences
- Children often feel 'different' to other people around them, and alone in their grief experience as a child
- Children, and in particular younger children, can experience regressed behaviours. Most common are bed-wetting, separation anxiety, wanting to co-sleep, and increased comfort-seeking behaviours.

What you can do

Bereaved children need loving adults in their life that they can talk to and share with. These loving adults can help support a child through grief by:

- Letting them talk about the person who has died
- Playing with them; entering their world and joining their play
- Saying the person's name who has died (if culturally appropriate)
- Reading them stories that incorporate loss, death and grief
- Letting them know that you love and care about them and about how they are feeling
- Allowing them space to talk about their feelings and provide reassurance that this is normal and OK.

How to support adolescents through grief

Grieving can be complicated for adolescents given the other emotional, social and physical changes that are occurring alongside their grief.

How adolescents express grief

- Grieving adolescents often experience very strong and overwhelming emotions, which can be confusing for them.
- Adolescents still don't know 'how' to grieve, and what is okay and not okay to express when grieving. They may test the waters both culturally and socially to see what is okay. They may push boundaries and limits, withdraw or even regress to a younger age.
- Adolescents will often avoid drawing attention to themselves or standing out from their peers, so they may downplay the impact of the death on them.

- Adolescents may decide to actively differentiate from their peers and highlight the impact the death is having on them.
- Adolescents may engage in more risk-taking behaviours to gain mastery over their experience (i.e. nothing can hurt me as much as this death has), or engage in behaviours that numb or distract from the pain.

The need for control and mastery over their own life is a central desire for teenagers. When their grief is validated and respected, it gives the teenager permission to share and process their grief with others around them.

What you can do

- Allow them to pull away and process their grief privately if they choose to
- Offer a space outside of the immediate family to talk to someone about what they are feeling (such as extended family relative, a school staff member, a professional counsellor)
- Let them talk when they are ready
- Spend time with them, doing things they enjoy
- Spend one on one time if possible
- Share memories together
- Enter their world; care about the little details and the things they share

Where to find more information

Resources about the voluntary assisted dying process

The Department of Health have made information available to the community regarding voluntary assisted dying in Western Australia (WA).

On the [HealthyWA website](https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au) (<https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au>) you can find a range of useful information sheets, including:

- [information about the process itself](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/Corp/Documents/Health-for/Voluntary-assisted-dying/Overview-of-the-Process.pdf)
ww2.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/Corp/Documents/Health-for/Voluntary-assisted-dying/Overview-of-the-Process.pdf
- [supporting someone through the process](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/Corp/Documents/Health-for/Voluntary-assisted-dying/Supporting-Someone-Through-the-Process.pdf)
https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/Corp/Documents/Health-for/Voluntary-assisted-dying/Supporting-Someone-Through-the-Process.pdf
- [considerations for an assisted death](https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/Corp/Documents/Health-for/Voluntary-assisted-dying/Considerations-for-an-Assisted-Death.pdf)
https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/Corp/Documents/Health-for/Voluntary-assisted-dying/Considerations-for-an-Assisted-Death.pdf

The WA VAD Statewide Care Navigator Service are also here to assist you, and can often help in answering questions and providing some resources for you and your family. The Care Navigators can be contacted by email and phone during standard work hours (8:30am – 5:00pm).

Email: VADcarenavigator@health.wa.gov.au Phone: (08) 9431 2755

[HealthyWA End of Life care](https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/End-of-life-care)

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Mental health supports

When a family member is very unwell and is expected to die, it can be very distressing for those closest to them. There are a range of mental health services available which you can access for no or low cost. Consider talking to your General Practitioner (GP) about accessing mental health supports suitable to you and your family. You can also access crisis support lines via the following numbers:

[Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au) – 13 11 14 <https://www.lifeline.org.au>

[Suicide Call Back Service](https://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au/) – 1300 555 788 <https://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au/>

[Samaritans Crisis Line](https://thesamaritans.org.au/) – 135 247 <https://thesamaritans.org.au/>

Grief support services

Following your loved one's death, you may feel isolated in your grief journey. There are several grief support services and resources available for families who are bereaved:

[Lionheart Camp for Kids](https://lionheartcampforkids.com.au/) <https://lionheartcampforkids.com.au/>

[National Centre for Childhood Grief](https://childhoodgrief.org.au/) <https://childhoodgrief.org.au/>

[Griefline](https://griefline.org.au/) <https://griefline.org.au/>

[Grief Centre of WA](https://www.griefcentrewa.org.au/) 0404 658 052 <https://www.griefcentrewa.org.au/>

[The Compassionate Friends WA](https://www.compassionatefriendswa.org.au/) <https://www.compassionatefriendswa.org.au/>

Cancer specific support services

If your loved one has a diagnosis of cancer, there are additional support services available to your family:

[Cancer Council](https://www.cancer.org.au/support-and-services) <https://www.cancer.org.au/support-and-services>

[CanTeen](https://www.canteen.org.au/) <https://www.canteen.org.au/>

[Leukemia Foundation](https://www.leukaemia.org.au/) <https://www.leukaemia.org.au/>

Support services for families

Navigating parenting and family relationships following a loved one's death can be difficult. There are local and national support services available for you and your family:

[Ngala Parenting Line](https://www.ngala.com.au/parenting-line/) – (08) 9368 9368 <https://www.ngala.com.au/parenting-line/>

[Family Relationship Advice Line](https://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/talk-someone/advice-line) – 1800 050 321 <https://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/talk-someone/advice-line>

[Relationships Australia](http://www.relationshipswa.org.au/) <http://www.relationshipswa.org.au/>

[Maggie Dent – Parenting Help](https://www.maggiedent.com/common-concerns/) <https://www.maggiedent.com/common-concerns/>

[Raising Children – “Death: How to talk about it with children”](https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/connecting-communicating/tough-topics/death-how-to-talk-about-it) <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/connecting-communicating/tough-topics/death-how-to-talk-about-it>

Support services for children and youth

Bereaved children and young people can often feel alone in their bereavement journey. As well as local grief services listed, there are specific services for children and youth that can support your child:

[Kids Helpline](https://kidshelpline.com.au/) – 1800 55 1800 <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

[Headspace](https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/grief-and-loss/) <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/grief-and-loss/>

[Reachout](https://au.reachout.com/) <https://au.reachout.com/>

[Wombat's Wish](https://wombatswish.org.au/) <https://wombatswish.org.au/>

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with disability.

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