

Penhaligon's Friends



Questions Children May Ask After Bereavement

What happens to someone's body when they die? a dead person's body can't do the things it used to do. The body is no longer able to talk, walk, move, see or hear. The dead person no longer feels pain, sadness, anger or discomfort.

Their body will be taken from the place where they died, to the funeral home. At the funeral home, they may be dressed in clothes that he/she liked and put into a casket/coffin. A casket/coffin is a box we use so that when they are buried in the ground, no dirt will get on them. Because their body isn't working any more, their body won't move or do any of the things it used to do. After a while we will have a special ceremony called a funeral to remember them. At that time, the casket/coffin will be closed and buried in the ground.

Viewing the body - Give details of what to expect if viewing the body in an open casket/coffin. This is especially helpful for young children to grasp that the person is, in fact, dead. Explain that the person will be lying down, not moving, and what they will be wearing. Explain any change in appearance due to illness, weight loss, or trauma. Reassure them that it is still their body, but explain how they will look different because i.e. they were ill /injured.

When will they come back? They can't. They didn't leave; their body stopped working.

Why don't they move? They can't move because their body has stopped working.

Why can't they be fixed? Once the body has stopped working, it can't start again.

Are they sleeping? No. When we sleep our body is still working, our heart is still beating, our lungs are still breathing and we are just resting. Sleep is important for us to stay healthy.

Can they hear me? No. They could only hear you if their body was working.

Where do dead people go? You may find it helpful to explain that nobody really knows what happens when someone dies but what we do know is that their body no longer works. You could say that we find it comforting to think that the part that we know and love of them isi.e. within us/in our heart/in a special place called Heaven etc. as this is how we cope with them not being here with us anymore.

Children often confuse 'Heaven' and 'Devon'! Check their understanding by asking them about what they think.

Children need to know that the person did not choose to leave them (this may need variation if the cause of death was suicide – please refer to our 'Explaining Suicide to Children' handout. Be cautious about saying things like 'they have gone to a better place' as this can be hard for children to understand why they have gone without them or feeling



they are not good enough to be with. Some children may also say they want to die to go to this 'better place'.

Remember – always check how your child is feeling about any religious or spiritual beliefs you share with them.

Can they come back again? As per the previous question, explain that they can't come back as they were, however their memory still stays with us and, if related you may even feel it appropriate to explain that they are connected by blood still.

Why couldn't doctors make them better? In many cases when someone is unwell they will get better, even after accidents we often get better. Sadly, there are some times when a person's body is so unwell or damaged that it stops working and can't be fixed.

When will I stop feeling sad? It is okay to feel sad when someone so special dies. Perhaps we will always be sad that they are not with us. Over time we will be able to cope better with our sadness and we will do this by supporting each other and at times we may need someone to talk to or someone to hug. Ask what you can do to help them when they feel sad and let your child know what you need when you are sad to give them a role, perhaps to give you a hug or get you a drink.

Why did they die? It is okay to explain to your child how the person died, even when the cause of death has been traumatic, for example suicide or murder. (see our separate guide on explaining death through suicide/murder) Keep explanations simple and explain that for anyone to die it must be a very serious reason. Make it clear that an illness or accident was a serious one and different from common illnesses and falls we all have from time to time.

Can I have new mummy/daddy now? Acknowledge for your child how difficult it may be for them not having their mummy/daddy with them now they have died. How hard it might be seeing all the other children with their parents. Let them know that even though they have died they will always be their mummy/daddy. You could explain that sometimes new relationships develop between the remaining parent and a new partner and the new partner may become an important person in their life as a step dad/step mum however reassure your child that they will not replace the person who died. It will not mean we have forgotten them or that we can't talk about them and remember them still.

Will someone else die now or will I die? Whilst it may be tempting to promise your child that nobody else will die – this is not a promise you can keep and it could ultimately damage your child's trust in you. You can acknowledge how frightened or concerned your child is about someone else dying and explain that everything that lives will die one day. You can reassure them that you don't expect anyone else to die and that you hope to live a long time yet and it is not something they need to worry about at the moment/for a very, very long time. You could also reassure your child that it is very rare for children to die and that you expect them to live a very long life until they are old. (be aware that we are all old to a 5 year old! You may need to explain life lines in much more detail!)