



EXPLAINING DEATH TO A CHILD: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND OTHER CAREGIVERS

Telling a child that someone has died is painful for all involved. It may be tempting to minimize or avoid the conversation in order to spare your child from suffering; however, grief experts agree that even very young children benefit from clear explanations of death and grief.

Angus Is Here is best read after you have had this difficult discussion with your child. Here are a few guidelines to help you prepare for it.

Choose a calm time and place

Plan to talk in a quiet, comfortable location when you and your child are in a calm state of mind. You may wish to provide a toy to play with or a comfort item, such as a favorite blankie.

Use clear language

It's important to use clear, direct language when discussing death with children, including the words "death," "dying," or "died." Phrases such as "passed away," "gone to heaven," or "no longer with us" can be confusing, especially for young children.

In *Angus Is Here*, the parents offer a child-friendly description of death that emphasizes the physical body:

My parents had told me that when someone dies, their body stops working.
They can't feel anything, so there's no pain or sadness.
And once someone has died, their body does not come back to life.

Define the physical body

You can add to such a description as necessary to ensure your child fully understands what "body" means. For example, some children think "body" refers only to the neck down, so you might need to specify that it includes the head. You might also need to clarify that the deceased pet or person can no longer see, hear, or think.

Share the reason

Don't shy away from providing the cause of death. For example, using simple language, you could explain that an illness gradually made the body stop working. You don't need an abundance of detail but be prepared for questions.

Repeat information as needed

Give your child an opportunity to ask questions and review any concepts you feel they haven't absorbed or accepted. You might find it necessary to repeat information several times—not only during your initial discussion, but in subsequent conversations over the coming days, weeks, or months. For example, a grieving child may keep asking when someone who died will come back and need to be gently reminded that death is permanent.

Discuss physical death first

Angus Is Here doesn't affirm or contradict beliefs about the afterlife and is appropriate for both secular families and families of faith. If you wish to discuss the afterlife with your child, make sure they understand the death of the physical body first. This will help them distinguish between the body and soul and to accept that they will not see the deceased again in this life.

Say goodbye

Provide an age-appropriate opportunity for your child to say goodbye to a deceased loved one. This could take the form of a ceremony or a creative activity, such as writing a song, poem, or letter. In *Angus Is Here*, the family makes a memory book together so they can revisit their memories of Angus whenever they wish.

Prepare for many emotions

Reassure your child that it's natural to experience many different emotions after a death. These may include unpleasant feelings, such as sadness, fear, and anger, as well as more positive feelings, such as relief or happiness. You can encourage your child to express their emotions by asking how they feel or sharing a story about grief.

Reading *Angus Is Here* together

Angus Is Here demonstrates that grief slowly heals over time. It can also prompt conversations about your child's feelings and the grieving process. For example, you could ask your child to describe how the main character feels at different points in the story and whether they can relate to these feelings.

Further resources

For more information about discussing death, dying, and grief with children, visit the Canadian Virtual Hospice at Kidsgrief.ca and the National Alliance for Children's Grief at Childrengrieve.org.