



When a parent or close relative is dying

You may share your own spiritual beliefs with your child and this can be a great comfort. Don't be too upset or alarmed if your child expresses a wish that they could go to heaven or visit the person. This again, is very common for young children and relates to their own lack of understanding about dying and the finality of death. For many children, heaven can sound like a 'magical' place that they would like to visit and the concept can be very difficult for them to understand. Sometimes they mainly want to be with the person, and so may say things like this.

It's a good idea to let your child's nursery, playgroup, daycare, school, or child minder know about your current situation as your child may talk about it or act out situations or concerns in front of them. Let them know what explanations you have given to your child to ensure that you're being consistent. It may be helpful to share this with friends and family members that have regular contact with your child too.

If you have particular concerns about your child's behaviour or grief then do speak to your GP or health nurse. There may also be a counsellor or social worker in the team at the hospital or hospice who can be of support to you.

This has been adapted from a guide developed by the Marie Curie Palliative Care Institute and the Childhood Bereavement Network, United Kingdom.

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This document can be made available in alternative formats on request.

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To be used as a resource to support toddlers and pre-school children when a parent or close relative is dying.

Supporting very young children, when a close relative is seriously ill, can be difficult and people often feel unsure what to say and how best to prepare them.

Young children, particularly babies and toddlers, will have little, if any understanding or concept of serious illness and dying. However, they will be aware if their main carer is absent, either because they're ill or they're caring for a sick relative. Children at this age are very sensitive to changes in their daily routines and schedules and as such may have loud and angry protests if there are changes.

Try as much as you can to maintain routines for your young child as this will give them a sense of security and reduce stress. This may mean that you have to enlist the help of other family members or friends. There may also be local agencies which can provide some support and care for your child. Perhaps you could speak to the team at the hospital or hospice for advice with this.

It's not uncommon for young children to regress at stressful times, so children who have just grasped potty training may start to have more 'accidents' and soiling again or dummies/comfort blankets which had been discarded may be sought out. Try not to worry, in most cases this is only a short term measure that your child may have adopted for extra comfort or reassurance.

Maintaining routines will also include keeping to usual bedtimes and discipline. You may be tempted to let these things change at this time but keeping the usual rules and boundaries in place will give your child the reassurance that life is continuing.

You may, understandably, find yourself becoming emotional and distressed at this time. This is very natural and you may be worried about your child seeing you upset.

If you're feeling overwhelmed with your feelings and emotions it may be a good idea to try and enlist some support from family and friends and give yourself the time that you need.

Remember that it's very important to look after yourself at this time. You need to grieve and express your own feelings and you also need to have regular meals and rest. Again, these are things that friends, families or local agencies may be able to assist with.

Keep any explanations that you give to your child short and in words that they can understand. Try not to give them too much information all at once. Invite questions and give lots of reassurance. Don't be tempted to use other words or phrases with children, such as 'daddy is going to sleep'. This may seem gentler, but in the long term can be much more frightening.

Pre-school children may check out their understanding with repeated questioning. This can be distressing for you but is actually very common and a normal way for children to develop their understanding at this age. Stress to a child that there is nothing that they have done to cause the illness or death as children can believe that they have the power to make bad things happen.

Also try to explain that the doctors and nurses are working hard to keep their special person comfortable although they can't make them better. This can be very confusing for young children to understand when they believe that this is their job to make people better again.

