

Talking with children about death and grief

Produced by the Children & Youth Officer for the Diocese of Brechin, Scottish Episcopal Church



We protect children from the reality of death as far as we can. In the past they saw death and dying in the natural world, but nowadays children tend to encounter it virtually, through TV, films and games. Deaths of family members usually happen remotely, in hospital, and the death of a pet is often the first direct experience that children have of death and bereavement.

When death does happen in a family, or when it becomes national news during a pandemic or on the death of the Queen, children will have worries, questions and big feelings that they need help with. This short guide brings together advice from experts in this field to help church leaders, and the parents and grandparents in their congregations, to support children and young people.

Sharing our story of death and dying - a theologian's perspective

At a conference for church youth and children's workers, Anne Richards, author of [Children in the Bible](#), discussed how we struggle to talk about death with children. We often resort to euphemisms like "she's lost her mum" or "Grandad's passed" which can leave children confused about the reality of death. She emphasized the importance of plain speaking about dying, as both a physical reality and a spiritual experience. She challenged us, as Christians, to explain with clarity our own narrative about death, from Good Friday to Resurrection, and our own hope of eternal life.

Finding life and hope - the children's hospital chaplain

[Rev Paul Nash](#), senior chaplain at Birmingham Children's Hospital, has spoken of his work with long term sick and dying children, and their families. His job description is "seeking to lift children's spirit". His job is not necessarily to find answers: it is primarily about "being present and building community", seeking to help sick children and their families find what gives them life, hope and strength. This is especially to be found in a sense of belonging and being connected to others. When facing the reality of death, Rev Nash said that children need four things: hope, resilience, connectedness and ritual. He described using simple activities with sick children and their siblings, which are playful and prayerful, to give them creative ways of expressing their feelings and, often, their deep spiritual understanding.

Things to say and do when talking to children about death:

- **Use clear language** e.g. "She was very old and her body was worn out, so she died."
- **It's OK to be sad together** – this teaches children that big feelings are normal, and grown-ups have them too.
- **Children process grief differently from adults.** For them, grief can be like a big puddle which they hop in and out of: one minute they are tearful and overwhelmed, and the next they are asking whether they can have a chocolate biscuit. This is normal: go with the flow and be prepared for a sudden change of mood when they suddenly find themselves in the puddle again.
- **Be open to questions**, which may be earthy ("What happens to dead bodies?") or spiritual ("Where exactly is heaven? Are there dogs there?") or deep and baffling ("What are souls made of?") Answer them as simply and honestly as you can, and it's OK to say, "I don't know".

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- **Children learn through play:** they may want to act out a funeral for a toy. Resources such as [Play Church](#) help children learn through play about all the church's sacraments.
- **Read together.** There are many books for children (*see below*) which sensitively handle the subject of death and bereavement. Helpful in themselves, these books can also open up conversations about how Christians believe that death is not the end: see especially [Water Bugs and Dragonflies by Doris Stickney](#).
- **Pray together.** Offer opportunities for creative prayer (*see below*).

RESOURCES

Telling children someone has died

The charity Winston's Wish has produced a very useful guide [here](#). There are also [bereavement resources](#) and a [support helpline](#).

Books to read and talk about death with children and teenagers

There is a long list of excellent, age-appropriate books compiled by the charity Hospiscare [here](#).

Grief support for children and teenagers

There is detailed, age-appropriate information produced by the charity SeeSaw [here](#).

Supporting children after the death of the Queen

The charity Winston's Wish offers guidance [here](#).

Creative prayer responses

- See [Flame Creative Children's Ministry](#) for many excellent creative prayer ideas.
- [Messy Church](#) offers creative ways of responding to the Queen's death with families.
- Prayer Spaces in Schools has produced some reflective prayer activities for the Queen's death [here](#) (free login required).
- [Here](#) is one church's example of all-age condolence materials to mark the Queen's death.

(Right – a small church window painted with non-permanent glass paints by children with prayers of thankfulness)



Supporting a four-year-old on the death of his cat – one parent's story

This is a personal story shared by the lead playworker of a church toddler group. Her son's name has been changed, but this is her experience in her own words. Her story of how she helped her son through his first experience of death shows what the advice outlined above can look like in practice, including straightforward conversation and the use of ritual.

"I recently lost our cat and had to go through the process with a young child. I have decided to share what I did to help Jamie (4) go through this process with various methods, as some of you may like to have this knowledge.

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We were lucky that we knew we were going to lose our cat in advance. The first thing I did was to make Jamie aware that we were not going to have our cat forever as he was not well and getting old. I then let him take the lead by answering any question honestly and at a level he could understand.

We bought stories to help with his understanding. [Goodbye Mog by Judith Kerr](#) is a great story where Mog goes to sleep forever and helps the new kitten settle into the family. [When a Pet Dies by Fred Rogers](#) is more factual with suitable language explaining a pet death and how to explore your feelings. The books were also great for myself to answer Jamie's questions.

As our cat's health deteriorated over the weeks, we made Jamie aware of this every time he wanted to give our cat some attention by explaining that his body was sore and will soon stop working. The books were great to let Jamie decide that he wanted to bury our cat in the garden when the time came.

Sadly the time came to visit the vet. The night before, I reminded Jamie that our cat might not wake up soon and made sure he could see our cat to give him attention, and again in the morning before taking Jamie to school. I then brought our cat home and placed him so it looked like he had passed away in his sleep just like in *Goodbye Mog*.

Jamie had a good day at school as he was not aware of the vet visit. I then collected him and only mentioned that I couldn't wake up our cat once at the front door. He went into our house to find our cat sleeping and thought he was alive. I corrected Jamie by saying have a closer look and touch him. It was at that moment Jamie realised what had happened and it was a valuable and important lesson. Now how you handle it from here is very important. I took my time with Jamie, letting him cry, hug and answering any questions for as long as it took. Jamie then decided that he wanted to watch some video which I allowed as he wanted a distraction to feel better. He then started asking questions about death soon after, at which I offered to read the Fred Rogers book again to help answer them. After our book I offered making our resting stone. Jamie decided that I was to decorate it but with him telling me how to. After that I asked him about putting our cat into a box so we can bury him. He was ready to do this, and we said our final goodbyes, collected some fur and petted him. Once boxed, I then asked if he was ready to go to the garden, again he was ready and said that he only wants to watch which was perfectly fine.

We choose a spot in the garden and dug our hole and place our cat inside. Once covered we placed our resting stone and Jamie wanted to add some flowers, so we picked some he liked and placed them on the grave.

(A simple painted stone like the one below can be a good thing for a child to make to mark a special place of remembrance.)



The main points to take from this are being open, honest, patient and listening to your child in these situations. I am and will still be getting questions from Jamie for a while, along with recognising his emotions. By answering his questions, it will help him deal with the loss of his best friend.

I also made anyone else who looks after Jamie aware of the situation, like teachers and grandparents, as your child's behaviour may become more challenging when there is a big change in their lifestyle. I also recommend having lots of photos and videos of your pets so your child can look back on happy memories when they ask for them. I hope my experience is not needed but it is here for anyone who needs it."