

## Talking to children about **illness**, **death** and **dying**

Talking to children about the long term illness or death of a loved one can be very difficult.

There is no 'right thing' to say, only what is 'good enough' based on their age and level of understanding. Sometimes 'good enough' is simply a case of telling them the facts of the situation and then sitting with them so they know you're there and letting them start the conversation.

If you have some news to give, try to make sure the environment is right; no distractions (such as phones or television); a safe place (at home where possible), with something to help express feelings (perhaps a bear to cuddle or a ball to kick).

Doing something while you talk can help to make it easier; drawing; walking; a long car journey; anything that keeps hands busy while the mind thinks.

Never force your child to talk, just let them know you are there when they want to.

Reactions to news can be varied and their expression of emotion may change over time. They may not react initially but then cry or get angry later, they may even laugh. This is all perfectly normal.

Talking about illness and death is as much about listening as it is about telling.

Children often have their own views and questions which are best answered as honestly as possible. If you do not know the answer, tell them you don't know but that you will share with them when you do. Never make promises you cannot keep.

Try not to use euphemism or slang as this can lead to some confusion, e.g. telling a child that a loved one has 'gone to sleep' may give the impression that they will wake again.

Equally using medical terms may also be just as confusing, e.g. telling a child a loved one has a tumour without explaining what it is may lead them to think they can catch it like a cold.

Depending on the child's age they will have different understandings of serious illnesses and dying. Try using simple terms and ideas which can be expanded upon, e.g. 'Nanny has been very poorly and the medicine isn't working anymore'.

Ultimately, conversations between children and their care givers makes relationships stronger, making it better for families to cope as a whole.