



# 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.

The information in this leaflet will help you talk to children about illness, death and dying.

565 Service provides emotional support for children, young people and families living with a family member with progressive illness.



## 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.

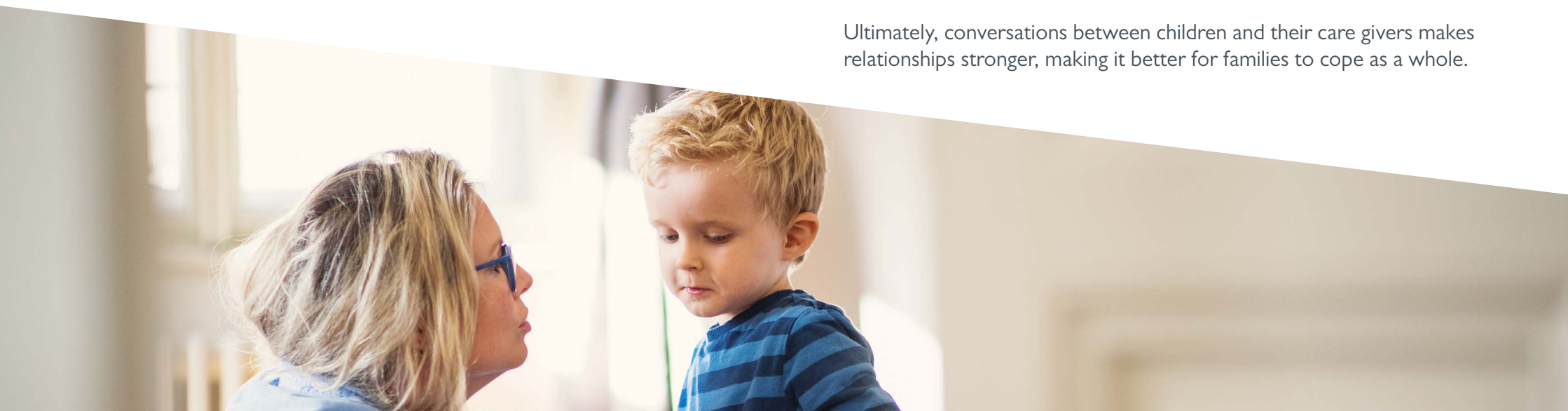
Children often have their own views and questions which are best answered as honestly as possible. If you do not know the answer, tell them you don't know but that you will share with them when you do. Never make promises you cannot keep.

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.



# How much **does it cost?**

All emotional and spiritual wellbeing services at St Elizabeth Hospice are free. St Elizabeth Hospice is a registered charity and relies on gifts and donations to carry out its work. Because of people's generosity we are able to offer bereavement support free of charge to the relatives and friends of hospice patients.

## **Tell us** what you think

Hearing about your experience of St Elizabeth Hospice can help us to improve our services and provide better care and support for those who need it.

To make a comment or complaint, or to compliment us on something we've done well, please write to us or visit [stelizabethhospice.org.uk](http://stelizabethhospice.org.uk)

## Contact **us**

**0300 303 5196**

[emotionalwellbeing@stelizabethhospice.org.uk](mailto:emotionalwellbeing@stelizabethhospice.org.uk)

[stelizabethhospice.org.uk](http://stelizabethhospice.org.uk)

**565 Service, St Elizabeth Hospice**

565 Foxhall Road, Ipswich, Suffolk IP3 8LX



**LIVINGGRIEF**  
Let's talk about grief...

St Elizabeth  
Hospice