

The Myton Hospices

Talking to Children about Dying



Rainbow Ripples - Support for children and young people

Rainbow Ripples provides a bereavement (and pre-bereavement) service for children who have a family member or close friend who is receiving any Myton services. One of Rainbow Ripples' aims is to help parents directly or indirectly during the tough times of sharing such serious news with their children.

How can I tell them and what should I say?

Preparing a child for the loss of a parent or loved one is an incredibly hard thing to do. There can be no instruction; there is no right or wrong way to tell a child that someone special to them is dying. Most people do choose to tell their children, and we would always recommend that you do.

Sometimes people don't want to tell children what is happening, as they can't bear the pain and heartache they know it will cause. However, even very young children normally sense that something is happening and will often feel anxious and afraid. If you don't explain things to them, they can often feel unable to talk about it or ask questions. The more that you can talk to your child about what is happening, the better they will be able to cope.

Some general tips are shared here which you will hopefully find helpful, however what you say and how you talk to your child should be based on the child's age and stage of development. You or the person closest to the child will know the best way to manage this difficult conversation.

When should I tell?

Children prefer to know the truth from their parents in a warm, safe, loving environment with the freedom and encouragement to ask their questions and to be given honest answers. So, when is the time right?

You will want to choose a time when you know that you won't be disturbed, and when you won't be in a rush. Consider having your partner, or another adult who is close to the child with you. If you don't have someone to help you, ask one of our nurses, doctors or one of our counselling team to help you explain things to your child.

What should I say?

A good way to start the conversation is to ask the child what changes they may have noticed.

Most children sense that things are becoming more serious just by the way you're acting and changes in the way you look, especially if you are struggling to do things that you had previously managed with ease. They will have noticed relatives or friends are visiting and helping out more.

Depending on the child's age they may be worried that you might die – they are often too scared to talk about what they fear the most. We can't protect children from death; we encounter it all the time. Most children will have had some previous experience of death, even if it is only something that they have seen on TV. If they have had a pet that has died, it can help them to understand that death is permanent, and their special person will never be there again.

You can't stop your child/children feeling sad, but you can support them by listening and talking. Even if you don't know what to say, it is better to address the subject than ignore it, take your cues from them, 'what do you understand about what is happening?' can be a starting point.

You might explain that the medicine the doctors have been giving to you isn't working any more, which is why things are now getting worse. You might want to explain that therefore your body isn't working like it's supposed to and will stop working.

- Short conversations are often easier than long sessions
- Children understand words literally and you may need to check their understanding. Be clear and direct in your language, using phrases like 'passed away' rather than 'died' may be confusing.
- Answer questions honestly and without embellishment. If you don't know, say so.
- Listen carefully to what is being said, so you know exactly what they mean
- There is no harm in a child seeing that you are sad or crying if someone has died. It will help them understand their own feelings/own grief is acceptable.
- Reassure the child as often as necessary that it isn't their fault
- Don't be surprised if your child goes off and plays after talking to them - they are digesting the information and will dip in and out of it

Questions a child might ask

Children may ask practical questions instead of talking about their feelings - these are entirely sensible things to wonder and it can be reassuring to a child if you discuss them, rather than dismissing them;

- Why do people die?
- Where do dead people go?
- Why did they go and leave me?
- Why didn't someone else die instead?
- Is death a kind of sleep?
- Does dying hurt?
- When someone dies are they being punished?
- Why can't we stop people from dying?
- How long will I live?
- Will I ever feel any better?
- Why do we have a funeral?
- What happens at a crematorium or cemetery?
- What's it like inside a coffin?
- What's it like to be dead?
- Will I be a ghost when I die?

Reactions to the news

All children are different and may react differently. There will be some reaction even if you cannot necessarily associate it with the news of your approaching death.

Crying – some children may sob, some may scream or shout

Rejection – I will abandon daddy before he abandons me, that way the pain will be easier to bear

Clinging – if I cling on tight perhaps I can stop him dying

Indifference – I don't care, if I pretend it doesn't hurt perhaps it won't

Being very good – perhaps mummy is dying because I have been naughty, if I am good, she won't die

Anti-social behaviour – stealing at school, bed wetting, tantrums, drink, drugs

Change in eating habits – fussy eating, over eating, refusing food

Regression – in some small children you may see some regression for a while – acting younger than they are

If you compare the reactions in children, you may notice some similarities to the emotions you experienced when you were first told the news.

Be prepared to repeat this conversation:

Younger children will probably not fully understand what it really means the first time they hear it. You may have to repeat this discussion many times for them to fully understand. If a child doesn't want to believe what you've told them, they may ask the same questions repeatedly, often as if the conversation had never happened. They do this hoping that the answer will be different the next time, hoping that somehow what they've been told isn't true.

Start to prepare

Keep to routine as far as possible, without excluding them from important events.

Include the child/children in the preparations by helping them to make memory boxes – a decorated cardboard box which could include:

- Memories
- Pictures
- Objects
- Milestones
- Favourite music
- Favourite things
- Smells - perfumes
- Letters and cards

Other activities include:

- Scrap books
- Photo albums
- Coloured salt jars (with each colour associated with a memory) – ask staff for details
- Write letters to give to the child at important times in their life – birthdays, Christmas, graduation, weddings
- Friendship book - where friends and relatives can write about you. A child whose mother/father has died loves to talk to people who knew them.
- Digital Legacies – record things on Facebook, make videos of fun, happy times with you in them telling them how you don't want to leave them and how much you love them
- Read a book into a tape recorder for your child to hear, probably repeatedly

What now?

The sooner you can share the news the sooner you will learn to cope with their reactions and living with the news can begin. Gradually over time children will learn to live with it, and grow and heal. Children are resilient, adaptable and forgiving. Knowing whatever you did, however you handled it, you did it the only way you could at the time, and from the best of motives, will not damage the relationship you have had with your children.

Myton Counselling Service is here to support your family. We offer 1:1 emotional support and support to children through our Rainbow Ripples group and MyTeens.

Rainbow Ripples (5 – 12-year olds) offers help and emotional support to children and young people as they cope with the pain of life without you.

MyTeens provides support to teenagers

For more information please contact Tel: 01926 838820



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