

Preschoolers (3 to 5 years old)

Understanding of Death

Preschoolers have a very limited concept of death. They may have trouble understanding that “dead is forever.” They will need lots of repetition and patience. They may feel confused about why a loved one died.

How to Help a Preschooler

Keep their routine as normal as possible. Meet their needs promptly and gently. (Meals, play, bathroom breaks, naps, and snuggles) This helps them feel safe. Preschoolers may be upset by a sudden change in rules. Keep your rules for behavior the same. Your child may experience some regression. Be patient, gentle, and consistent to help them get back on track.



Reassure your child that nothing they did, said, or wished caused the death to happen. Give a simple explanation for the cause of the death. *“Your brother’s heart didn’t grow the way it was supposed to. The doctors did everything they could to make his heart better. But his heart couldn’t get better. So he died.”*

Avoid phrases such as “gone away,” “sleeping,” or “in a better place.” These sound gentler to adult ears. But they can confuse young children. Use the words “death,” “dying,” and “dead.” Children need to hear these words. Give simple explanations of what they mean. *“Dead means that her body does not work anymore. Her heart does not beat. She does not breathe.”* When talking about burial or cremation, use simple language. Be clear about what happens to the person, and what happens to the body. Avoid saying *“We will bury Mom.”* Instead, say *“We will bury Mom’s body.”*

It is normal for a preschooler to “forget” that their loved one died. Most children this age do not understand that death is permanent. You may need to remind them many times. Your child may feel confused when they are sick or injured. Reassure them that they will get better. *“Your head can hurt. It doesn’t mean that you will die. It’s just a headache. You will get better.”*

Play is a very important part of grieving. Playing helps children cope. They will have brief moments of sadness, anger, and other emotions. Between these moments, they will play. Play helps children heal. This is normal and healthy for a preschooler.

Signs of Poor Coping

You may see changes in the way your child eats or sleeps. You may also notice more tantrums or some regression. Pay attention to your child’s play. Children will often show you what they are thinking and feeling through play. If you are concerned, call your child’s doctor. Play therapy can also help grieving children.



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Memory Making & Keepsakes

These are personal items that your child can hold. They help children to feel closer to the person who died. Always keep safety in mind. Save fragile or small items for when the child is older.



- Special items – Children may enjoy holding something from their loved one. For example a pillow, toy, or other soft item.
 - Arts and crafts made with their loved one's fingerprints or lock of hair.
 - Photos – Make a small book with photos of their loved one.
 - Letters from a loved one – If there is time, a loved one can create messages for the future. For example "a letter for my son's graduation." Or "a video for my little sister's birthday." These can be done as letters or drawings. Videos are good, too.
- Recordable story books – Some children's books include a built in microphone. You can record a loved one reading the story. Play it for your child to hear their loved one's voice. (Read the instructions carefully!)

Resources

No Matter What by Debi Gliori

This board book tells the story of family love. Together or apart, the love you share with a child lasts forever. Children and adults may find comfort in reading this book together.

I Miss You: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas

This book offers a gentle look at death. It talks about common questions that young children ask.

The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr

This book talks about feelings children may have when someone dies. It is honest, gentle, and helps with healing.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

This book explains death in a child friendly way. It uses simple words and repetition. It helps families find the words to talk about death with their children.

The Scar by Charlotte Moundlic and Olivier Tallec

This book tells the story of a boy whose mother died. It uses humor and honesty.

Websites:

- <https://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits/grief>
- www.centerforloss.com
- www.dougy.org
- <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/childrens-hospital/bereavement>

