



# Twelve guidelines for talking to children about death

## Acknowledging loss sensitively in an all-age setting



When members of our church family die, how can we acknowledge the loss that children might experience? Talking about death is difficult at any age, so how can we best help young ones recognise and accept their feelings, and point the way to a place of hope?

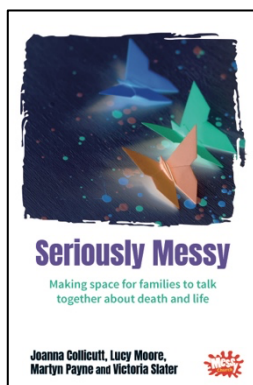
Below, Martyn Payne and Joanna Collicutt offer twelve key guidelines taken from *Seriously Messy: Making space for families to talk together about death and life* (BRF, 2019).

### Twelve key guidelines for talking to children about death

- 1** Keep your tone calm and matter of fact – make a space for conversation that feels ordered and safe.
- 2** Allow enough time so that you don't have to break off a conversation to rush on to something else.
- 3** Listen attentively and mirror the child's feelings back to them – 'You sound sad', 'That is a happy memory for you', 'That could be scary,' and so on. Try to convey the fact that it is okay to express feelings and that you won't be overwhelmed by them.
- 4** Let the child control the pace, duration and depth of the conversation – don't put pressure on a reluctant child to talk about these things, but equally don't hang back if the child seems curious or eager to talk.

- 5 Be content not to say anything but to share silence, perhaps while doing a craft activity or playing a game that touches on an aspect of death and loss in a low-key way.
- 6 Use clear language – ‘He died’ rather than ‘He passed on’ or ‘He fell asleep’.
- 7 If you want to use metaphors, then signal this by phrases such as ‘It’s sort of like...’
- 8 Be aware that children under the age of about seven understand that dead people don’t come back, but they don’t yet understand that people die because their bodies stop working.
- 9 Be aware that children under the age of about seven may think that they can cause bad things to happen by being naughty. (Older children and even adults sometimes still think this way, too.)
- 10 Be honest about what you don’t understand but communicate that you trust in a loving God and that he can be trusted.
- 11 If you feel it’s important to find out what the child is thinking about a particular issue, probe gently and indirectly – ‘I wonder what you think about...?’
- 12 Try to finish a conversation by turning the subject away from death to life, security and hope.

Each child, and each situation, is different – there is no one-size-fits-all approach, so these are only guidelines for you to use at your discretion.



For more information have a look at [\*Seriously Messy: Making space for families to talk together about death and life\*](#), from BRF.

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