

Talking to children about the death of Queen Elizabeth II

The whole country is very saddened to hear of the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the coming days may be difficult for many of us.

The death of a prominent and loved figure can raise questions from children and young people that you might find difficult to answer. We will all be surrounded with the coverage from the media and conversations we have with family, friends and colleagues reminding us of the death of the Queen and this will be an emotionally charged time and will remind us all of other losses we have experienced in life.

How to talk to children about the death of the Queen

Use clear, age-appropriate language

Although it's tempting to use terms like 'gone to sleep', 'passed away' or 'lost', this can be confusing to children who often take things literally. If she's gone to sleep, why can't we wake her up? If she's lost, why can't we find her? Although they feel harsh and blunt, using words like 'dead', 'died' and 'death' is a lot clearer for children.

Explain what death is

Children's understanding of death depends on the age, intellectual level, social environment and life experiences. The text box to the right provides an overview of understanding by chronological age. The death of the Queen may be the first time a child has encountered a death and it may be confusing and frightening to them. This is a clear way to explain death to them

"When someone dies, their body has stopped working and they can't be brought back to life. They are no longer able to do the things they could when they were alive, such as move or talk. When someone dies, their heart stops beating, they stop breathing, their brain stops thinking."

Reassure

Children may become concerned that other people may die. Provide realistic reassurance. 'We are all really healthy and we look after ourselves, eating healthy food and exercise and we want to live a long time'.

If somebody in your families is poorly give honest reassurance. 'I know granny is a little bit poorly, but the doctors are looking after her and giving her medicine trying to make her better'.

Let them ask questions and answer honestly

They are likely to have lots of questions, listening to these and trying to answer them will let them know you care and they can trust you. They will hear a lot of coverage and information on the television, radio and will overhear conversations so it is better to be honest, if we do not give them information, they are likely to imagine things that may be worse. If you do know the answers to the questions it is okay to say this and that you will try and find out the answer.

Children's Understanding of Death

A child's perception of death is influenced by their age, intellectual level, social environment and life experience.

Under 2 years-

No concept of death. Death experienced as a separation from someone they have an attachment to.

Aged 2-5 years-

Believe death is temporary (e.g. *'the hamster's not moving but he'll play with me tomorrow'*). Believe death is reversible and show 'magical thinking' (believe they caused the death or that they can bring the person back) (e.g. *'I was angry at him when he left for work. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came home again. It's all my fault', 'My mum will come back if I'm very good and eat my broccoli.'*)

Aged 6-9 years-

Child begins to develop a concept of finality, irreversibility, inevitability and universality. Children at this stage may be very curious about death.

Aged 9- 13 years-

Child begins to perceive death on an adult level.

How might they be feeling?

Children can respond to death in a number of ways. They may switch between upset and joy/laughter very quickly. Children may express their emotions through their play and behaviour. Children may become very clingy and have difficulty separating from the adults they are close to (they may be worried that something bad will happen to them). Children may be more restless, distractible, and tired. Children may show a decrease in activity and loss in motivation. They may lose their appetite or feel unwell (these may be 'somatic' complaints, where grief or unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort). Some children may display seemingly inappropriate behaviour, such as laughing, but this may be their way of coping (e.g. they do not want to be seen to cry) or happen because they are still learning how to express their emotions appropriately.

It is likely that they will look to the adults around them to make sense of their feelings and try to understand how they should be feeling. It is good to explore their and your own feelings giving them words they can use. 'I am feeling really sad and am crying because the Queen was a wonderful woman, and her death has also made me think about when Grandad died'.

Let them know that what they are feeling is fine, we all feel lots of things. It is also ok to feel sad even though we didn't know her personally because we saw her on our television and social media. It is also fine not to be upset and want to have fun because they may not have a connection to the Queen.

How are you feeling?

Just like for children we also may be feeling lots of mixed emotions. How we respond will be based on our connection to the Queen. It is ok to be feeling grief and be upset about the death of somebody you have never met, the Queen has been a constant in our life, on the television, in our newspapers, for some of us she joined us in our living room on Christmas day. This may be your first experience of loss which can be very confusing, or the Queen's death may bring back the very intense grief you have experienced losing a loved one.

If you are upset it is important to talk to someone, a friend, family member or a professional. Limit your exposure to the news and social media try to give yourself a break from this for a while and make sure you are undertaking activities to support your wellbeing. Do activities that you know make you feel better, get plenty of sleep, eat healthily and take regular exercise.

If you are feeling intense emotion. It is important to find a way to say goodbye as we do with the death of a close loved one. In the coming days details of how to commemorate her life and arrangements for the funeral will be announced. Find a way that you can remember her, celebrate her life, and say goodbye.

Further information, support and resources

Child Bereavement Network <https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/> - Advice on supporting children and young people

Winston Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org/> Advice on supporting children and young people

Cruse <https://www.cruse.org.uk/understanding-grief/grief-experiences/collective-grief/> Advice for adults

Department for Education <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education> - Advice and guidance should be released in the coming days

Education for Safeguarding <https://www.e4swsccalpha.co.uk/blog/remembering-queen-elizabeth-ii> Resources for Schools

Your Mind Matters [Your Mind Matters - West Sussex County Council](#) – Information on support for wellbeing

Andrea Morgan, Principal Educational Psychologist