

When a Friend Dies...

At some point in their childhood, most children will experience the death of a friend. It can be challenging to break the news to a child that his or her friend is gone. The death of a friend is difficult for children to understand. How kids respond depends greatly on their age, experiences, and personality. And when a peer dies, a child may be afraid that something similar could happen to them. The following tips will help you prepare how to best support a child:

- Children often want to know what it means to die. For young children, this may mean explaining that physically, death is a process where the body stops working.
- Avoid using phrases such as "passing on" or "went to sleep" because it may cause the child to have concerns that they might die in their sleep too.
- It is not uncommon for a child to have trouble understanding that their friend is gone. Since children do not grasp the idea of death until the approximate age of 9, young children may believe their friend is going to return.
- In attempting to process the loss of their friend, a child might ask some shocking questions about what happens to a body when it dies, etc. Always respond with accurate, but simple facts.
- Conversations about what it means to die may have to be repeated.
- The preschool child may suffer undue guilt because they are at the age when children believe they magically cause all kinds of things to happen, both good and bad. It is important to reassure the preschool child that "bad thoughts" or "angry words" don't cause people to die.
- Children may express their worries, fears, and conflicts about death through their play. This should not be a cause for concern unless the child is "stuck" in repetitive play of death-related scenes that don't seem to relieve the child's anxiety.
- Adults should not be afraid to show their own emotions about the death of this friend. Teach children that it is ok for them to be sad and to cry. Responding with no emotion may teach the child that emotional reactions are unacceptable.
- Convey a feeling of openness and encourage the child to come to you with any questions or if they feel like talking about the friend they miss.

