



by Karen Stephens

# The Great Beyond: Kids' Questions About Death

Whether it's the logistics of conception or the mysteries of death, the life cycle is a curiosity to children. They want to understand every nitty-gritty minute of the human experience. In their pursuit of knowledge they excel at coming up with some pretty good questions.

By age 5 or 6, most kids become aware that loved ones leave the family circle—for a long time. It will be several years, when they are 9 or 10, before kids realize the absence isn't temporary, not just another vacation trip. By age 9 most kids start to grasp the permanence of death. I don't know how long it takes them (or us!) to fully comprehend that each of us will exit life. I think we all live partially in denial, pretending death will always visit others, not us.

What I do know is that kids have lots of questions about death — how it happens, why it happens, why it can't be prevented, and why it can't be reversed. It's hard to anticipate how children will react to death, but you'll find out when they bombard you with questions.

In this column, I share typical questions children have about death. They have a need and a right to have their questions answered honestly and sensitively. To achieve that, parents must reflect on child development. That will help us provide answers that not only satisfy children's curiosity, but also assist them in their never-ending struggle to grasp the complexities of life.

**Children don't understand death is universal, inevitable, and irreversible.**

"Why won't Billy wake up?" "When is my brother coming home?" "Will mom and dad die, too?" These are questions kids struggle with when confronting the finality of death.

To understand death isn't "fixable," the brain has to grasp abstract concepts. Abstract thinking isn't one of children's long suits until age 12, which makes it harder to respond to kids' questions.

**Tip:** Until children mature answer questions at a level they can comprehend. It's fine to say, "I don't know," when it's the truth. It may be a week, months, or years before children fathom all aspects of death. Remind children one family death doesn't mean another is just around the corner, especially yours.

**Children believe what they see.**

"What do you mean Grandpa's in heaven? He's right there!" At age 7 I couldn't be convinced a person was in heaven when a body was in clear view in a casket. You may think I was just a stupid kid, but I wasn't. In fact, I was pretty typical.

Consider young Sarah. She was quite concerned when Grandpa's open casket revealed him only from the waist up. She wondered, "Where's the rest of grandpa?" If she couldn't see his legs, something must have happened to them!

At a cremation ceremony, four-year-old Rachael was perplexed. In a whisper she asked mom, "How are they going to fit grandpa into that little jar?" Such are the questions that test parents! I'm glad I wasn't answering that question!

**Tip:** Be honest and stick to basic facts. Avoid being too graphic for a child's age. Rachael's mom spared images of raging flames, but did tell Rachael that since

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Grandpa didn't need his body anymore, it was put into a special oven that turned it into ashes and tiny bits of bone.

**Children don't understand nuances of language.**

"Was Uncle Ted mad? Why did he kick the bucket?" You guessed it, that's a child's literal interpretation of slang referring to death. Children often create inappropriate images of death when overhearing casual conversations not intended for their ears.

**Tip:** When asked about slang, take time to explain. Slang might include: "Kicked the bucket, pulled the plug, croaked, keeled over, bit the big one, dropped dead, rolled over and died." And there's more. Do we really "die laughing" or "die of embarrassment?" Do we want challenging kids to think they'll "be the death of us yet?"

**Children find it hard to separate fact from fantasy.**

"Why is Grandma pretending to be asleep so long? When will she be alive again?" Children's love of make-believe and pretend makes understanding the irreversibility of death confusing. The more hours of television children watch, the more blurred the line between fact and fiction becomes. A character is shot dead one night, merely to pop up in another program the following night! No wonder kids think death is reversible!

**Tip:** Remind children that television shows and movies aren't real. Actors were making up a story by "pretending" to die. When a person really dies, their body never breathes, speaks, or moves again.

**Children fantasize (and believe!) they are all powerful.**

"Why can't I make Tommy wake up? Why can't I wish him back alive?" These questions reveal what psychologists call children's "magical thinking." For some reason, young children think they can do just about anything, just like their superhero cartoons.

It makes sense. Children are taught to wish on birthday candles, break the turkey's wishbone, wish upon a star, and make a holiday wish list. After all that indoctrination into the power of wishes, it's hard for children to accept that some wishes can't be granted.

**Tip:** Tell children they aren't responsible for death or for reversing it. Remind them there are some things in life no one can change, not even little kids who believe in magic.

**Children often misunderstand cause and effect.**

"Is God mad at me? Did he take mommy away because I was bad?" These are the questions that break a parent's heart.

Kids' emotions are strong and volatile. When frustrated by rules and reprimands they sometimes fantasize revenge, typically against parents. Over time they put away their plots as they learn to control their feelings and ultimately to obey and cooperate. Through these confrontations kids learn to make up after spats with family or friends.

Normally, this learning process isn't difficult. However, if death intervenes before reconciliation takes place, children can endure enormous guilt. Some children even feel guilty for angry thoughts they had years before a person's death! Why? Because children believe their angry thoughts were so powerful they actually killed a person. This is especially burdensome when that person is a parent.

**Tip:** Reassure children that angry and hurtful thoughts can't kill people. Only normal aging, severe illness or accidents with real objects can cause death.

Those are tips for answering questions about death. In the Parenting Exchange Library column, "A Time to Mourn: Helping Children Cope With Family Death" I share tips for helping children move through their grief process.

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**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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