

Should the children be allowed to visit?

Ideally, ask the children what they would like to do; offering them choice and alternatives if they choose not to e.g. sending a message, letter or picture. If they choose to visit prepare them for any changes that they are likely to experience e.g. 'Mummy is a lot sleepier now and cannot talk to you but she can hear you and will know that you are there' or 'Dad's breathing sounds quite noisy but it doesn't mean that he is in pain.'

Try to encourage your child to ask questions and talk about how they are feeling. Reassure your children that you will be there to support them.

This is a very difficult and painful time for you. Try to remember that the support and reassurance that you give to your children now will help them to adjust and cope in the months and years to come.

This has been adapted from a guide developed by the Marie Curie Palliative Care Institute and the Childhood Bereavement Network, United Kingdom.

The End-of-Life Care Program wishes to acknowledge the support of these organisations in providing permission to adapt this guide.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with disability.

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Talking to children when someone is dying



To be used as a resource for parents/carers for talking to children when a close friend or relative's death is near.

Talking to children and explaining that a close relative or friend is very ill and nearing death can be very difficult and daunting. You may be struggling to adjust and accept the news that you have been given and you may feel confused or unsure how to tell your children. However, it is important that you try to help your children to understand what is happening. Keeping them involved will help them in the long term.

Where should I tell the children?

Sometimes, you may have no choice but to tell the children at the hospice or hospital. If this is the case ask the ward staff if there is a quiet room or area where you can speak privately. It may be helpful to have another adult with you who can support you all if needed. If you are at home choose a familiar and quiet area of your home where you can give your child your full attention without distractions. Try to avoid bedtimes if possible.

How do I start the conversation?

Start with what your child already knows or has been told e.g. 'You know that mummy has been very ill over the past few weeks...' or 'You remember we talked about dad's cancer...'

How do I tell them that someone is dying?

Be honest and keep explanations brief and to the point. Give small pieces of information and check out your child's understanding. Try to avoid using words or phrases which may be even more frightening to your child e.g. 'Mummy is going to sleep forever.' This may seem a kinder or softer way to explain but can cause more confusion and distress. Be truthful, it is better to say, 'We don't know' than to give details which may be uncertain e.g. how much time is left.

How do I explain what dying means?

A child's understanding will depend on their age, maturity and previous experiences. It may be helpful to access specific information. As a general rule it is important to stress that death occurs when a person's body stops working. You may wish to talk in the context of your religious or spiritual beliefs.

What if I get upset when I am talking?

Don't worry if you become tearful and upset, it shows your child that it's okay to cry. If you feel very overwhelmed by your feelings it may be helpful to enlist the support of another family member/friend, or a member of staff.

