

# PORTLAND

*lifestyle & family*

PARENTING / OCTOBER 1, 2015

## How To Talk to Children About Death



The death of a loved one can be very difficult for a child or a teenager to fully understand. Parents and other important adults often struggle to find the right language and tone in discussing death, since the adult is also deep in his or her own grieving process.

Jana DeCristofaro is the coordinator of children's services at The Dougy Center, The National Center for Grieving Children and Families. DeCristofaro said that The Dougy Center's philosophy is that grief is a normal reaction to a loss. Part of that normal reaction is speaking openly and honestly with children about the person in their life who has recently died. The Dougy Center was founded in 1982 and was the first center in the country to support grieving

## IN PRINT

---

[READ THE PDF](#)

[IN OUR NEXT ISSUE](#)

[PAST ISSUES](#)

[FIND PORTLAND FAMILY](#)



children and their families. It has since grown and helped train over 500 national and international centers that use The Dougy Center's peer support model.

Common sense dictates that parents should say different things about death depending on whether the child is a preschooler, a school-aged child, or a teenager—but that's not necessarily true, according to DeCristofaro. Clear, concrete language is important to use with all ages. Avoiding euphemisms like, "Mom passed away" or "we lost Dad," is imperative. Otherwise, children can be confused by euphemistic language, believing, for example, that Dad could be found if he was only lost. DeCristofaro advocates for very direct, straightforward, yet compassionate communication with all children regarding death. "Children have a lot of wisdom that often gets overlooked," she says. "Adults feel like they need to have all the answers, but kids have wonderful insight."

Most important is to be honest with the child and to clearly state that the loved one has died. "It is important to say 'your Dad died,' which is saying that you are not afraid of the word 'died,'" DeCristofaro says. "As someone who supports grieving children, I want to communicate that I can handle their story."

If the loved one has died of an illness, it is helpful to name the illness. One can say, "Daddy died. His heart stopped working and the doctors were unable to fix it," or "Mom's cancer could not be cured and she died." If you say something general like "Mom got sick and died," a young child might become worried and anxious whenever he or someone he loves has a cold or the flu. Even though discussing suicide or drug or alcohol overdose might seem like too much for a child or a teenager to handle, DeCristofaro says that The Dougy Center encourages families to be honest about how the person died. Telling children the truth about the reality of their loved one's death helps

### Helping Kids with Grief

For some, a book is a wonderful gateway to discussing a difficult subject like death. Here are a few suggestions:

"My Father's Arms Are a Boat" by Stein Erik Lunde

In this beautifully illustrated book from Norway, the mother dies. This is best suited to children ages 4+.

"The Memory String" by Eve Bunting

In this word-heavy picture book, the mother dies. This book is suitable for children ages 5+.

SUBSCRIBE

ADVERTISE

## FREE PRINT SUBSCRIPTION

---

If you would like to request a free print subscription of Portland Family Magazine, please complete the following form and we will follow up with you.

Your Name (required)

Your Email (required)

Address

Address 2

City

State

destigmatize suicide or an overdose and also helps in the grieving process.

For parents to be there for their kids, it is essential that the parents themselves are being cared for while grieving. "Self-care for the adults can go out the window fairly quickly when parents are helping their child deal with a death," according to DeCristofaro. It is also important for adults to let their children know that they are going to be okay and for the parent to be open and honest with children about the parent's grieving process. By offering this type of reassurance, parents can help kids relax a little into the new reality. Keeping up with routines as much as possible can also be stabilizing for children who might be focused on changes in day-to-day routines. "Who is going to make me my snack every day now that Daddy died?" can be a common question.

Everybody grieves differently and it is important to allow for the uniqueness of personal grief at every age. There is no schedule or timeline, and there is no one way to grieve. Some children may cry a lot — this is typical for younger children. Some may not cry at all. Teenagers are often very private in their grief and might reserve talking about the person who died only with friends. For some people, grief looks like anger or frustration or irritability; grief doesn't always look like sadness.

The Dougy Center offers free peer support groups for children, teenagers and their families. Groups are divided by age of the child and by the manner in which their parent, caregiver, sibling or friend has died. Groups for parents and caregivers meet at the same time as the groups for children. For more information on peer support groups, contact The Dougy Center at (503) 775-5673.

"The Goodbye Boat" by Mary Joslin  
In this simply illustrated book, a grandmother dies. This book is appropriate for all ages.

"Each Little Bird That Sings" by Deborah Wiles  
This is a middle-reader book about a family that owns a funeral home, and a family member dies. This book is best for children aged 8–12 years old.

Zip Code

SEND



Ready to move your life and career forward?  
Marylhurst can help.

[LEARN MORE](#)

**MARYLHURST**  
UNIVERSITY

### LET'S KEEP IN TOUCH!

Join our e-mail list to get inspiring updates about fun, sometimes wacky, local family-friendly events.

First Name

0 SHARES

Ariel Frager



Ariel Frager is a school counselor and has a private therapy practice that specializes in treating children, adolescents and families. She lives in Portland with her husband, son, dog and kitty cat.



Last Name

Email

SUBSCRIBE

[View Past Newsletters](#)

**FIND US ON FACEBOOK**

---

**0 COMMENT**

---

## Leave a Reply

Comment