



## A Note About These Guidelines:

*These are unprecedented times. There is no roadmap yet. We are facing situations that we never expected or wanted to. Working together we can make it through with empathy, compassion and sense of service intact.*

*These guidelines have been rapidly assembled and should be seen as an acute response to a fast-moving pandemic. The situation is fluid, and best practice is likely to need to change quickly. As we learn more about the specific needs of people dying with COVID-19, these guidelines will be constantly updated, and we welcome your input and experience in helping to keep these as useful and relevant as possible.*

## How to tell children that someone has died

*This document is provided as a guide and acknowledges the information that has been adapted from the publication titled "How to tell children that someone has died" by Dr Louise Dalton et al.*

*Family traditions, culture and beliefs will also inform the telling of children.*

***Waiho i te toipoto, kaua i te toitoa. Let us keep close together not wide apart. (Maori Proverb)***

### When to tell

It may go against adults' protective instinct, but children need to know what has happened as soon as possible. Children are very perceptive and sensitive. They may be aware that something serious has happened before being told. Having a parent/caregiver who a child can trust is fundamentally important to a child's psychological well-being, particularly at a time of intense whanau/family distress.

Talking to children helps them to trust you and helps them to make sense of what is happening in their world.

### Preparing yourself

- If there is another adult available, share the news and plan to be together when telling the tamariki/children.
- Review what has happened and think about how the news can be shared in simple language that a child will understand. It can be helpful to write down the facts to support the conversation you will have.
- Even very young children (under 2 years) will need an explanation of what they are witnessing around them, to help them start to understand what has happened.
- Take a moment to take some deep slow breaths.
- Try to keep your focus in the moment, thinking about how you would want the children to hear the news about their whanau member/loved one's death.



## Preparing the information

News is best heard from a family member, but this is a very difficult conversation to have. If you feel unable to say the words, consider being in close proximity while someone else familiar to the whanau explains what has happened.

Think about the age and understanding of the children. What do they already know?

**Babies and toddlers** don't have an understanding of death or language to be able to express their feelings. They experience loss, separation and distress through their environment and the people around them.

**Pre-schoolers** also have limited language and reasoning and may find it difficult to understand that death is permanent. They can feel insecure and frightened when things at home change. Pre-schoolers often have 'magical' thinking, thinking that their family member can come alive again.

**5-12 years** are still developing a mature understanding of death and may have some confusing thoughts about it. Younger children in this age group may still have some 'magical' thinking and may also be concerned about the person who has died being lonely, cold or hungry (still being able to feel). This age group is often very interested in what happens to the body after death and can ask direct questions that can be difficult for adults to hear. A growing understanding that death is universal (happens to everyone) can mean that this age group can be worried that someone else may die or that they themselves may die.

**10-12-years** generally understand the concepts of death, that it is final, irreversible and universal. This is a time of social, hormonal and physical change. Young people may be more aware of how other people and adults are reacting to the death.

**Teenagers** know that death is a part of life. (It can be challenging to manage the demands of adolescence alongside a time of emotional intensity.)

## Prepare the environment

- Think about where the best place may be to have the conversation where you won't be disturbed. Have this conversation away from the child's bedroom/safe place.
- Be close to the child and consider having the child's attachment objects (blankets/teddies) nearby.

## What to say - explaining what happened

- Speak slowly, using words that are appropriate for the child's age and understanding. Be honest.
- Use real words, 'dead' or 'died'. Euphemisms such as 'passed away', 'gone to sleep' or 'lost' can be confusing for children.
- It is often culturally appropriate in New Zealand to use the term 'passed away', if you intend to use this term or whatever word is comfortable in your whanau, explain explicitly to the children that this means the person has died.
- Alert the children to the fact you have something sad to say "I have some sad news to tell you..."
- Say the name of the person who has died. Give the children time to absorb this news, it may have to be repeated.



- Explain to younger children that the deceased cannot come back.  
“Nana was so sick her body stopped working and she couldn’t breathe anymore, Nana has died.”  
“The doctors tried really hard to help Nana, but she was too sick for the medicines to help.”
- You may need to explain what dead means and this may depend on your individual circumstances and beliefs.  
“When somebody dies their body stops working, they can’t breathe, think, move or feel anymore.”
- Be aware that distress makes it harder to take in information, and give reassurance  
“Mostly people get better, and doctors and nurses do everything they can to help.”
- Try to balance being honest without too much information giving. More details can be added at a later date.

### Preparing for questions

#### *Consider the understanding of the child*

- If faced with a question that you are not sure how to answer, ask the child what they think. This will give you an idea of what they already know.
- If you need more time to formulate a response let the child know that you will think about their question and get back to them. Coming back to the child at a later time alerts the child to the fact that their questions are important and that you are working to get the correct answers. This will help the child to continue to trust you and the relationship they have with you.
- Children often want to know why someone has died and can worry that they are somehow to blame (something they said, thought or did).

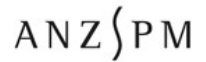
#### *It is important to reassure children that a death wasn’t their fault*

- Children may worry that someone else in the family may die or that they may die and have questions around who will look after them. It is important to reassure the child about the wellness of other family members and that the child will continue to be cared for.
- Be clear about whether the death was due to illness or not and reassure, for example, that cancer can’t be caught, that people are taking practical steps to manage the spread of coronavirus (handwashing, distancing) etc.
- Ask if the children have any other questions and let them know that you can continue to have conversations and answer any questions they may have.

#### *Managing children’s reactions*

- Children can respond in many ways to difficult news such as crying, shouting, not believing what is being said, going quiet or being distracted or asking a practical question such as “what are we having for dinner?”, there may be no immediate reaction. This may indicate that the child is simply overwhelmed rather than they didn’t hear what was being said.
- Younger children may focus on the practical aspects of their care and will need reassurance around this, such as who will take them to school or swimming lessons.
- Talk about feelings and how upsetting the news is for everybody. Explain that you are sad and that you cry sometimes because of feeling sad.
- Acknowledge the feelings you see in your children.

## the collaboration



- Sharing how you feel is helpful, but children often find it upsetting to see the adults around them distressed. It's ok to cry around children but protecting them from the rawness of big emotion or seeing you totally overwhelmed can be helpful.

### Finishing the first conversation, there will be more

- Reassure children that they don't have to manage this alone. Talk about who is inside the whanau and outside the whanau who can be of support. Sometimes having somebody outside of the family to talk to can be useful, children can share how they feel without being worried about upsetting the adults around them.
- Think together about how to talk to people around your children to let them know what has happened, if the child wants help to talk to friends.
- Talk to children about letting their kindy or school teacher know, whoever may share the care of your child.
- You may need to return to this conversation many times, particularly with younger children as they learn to make sense of what has happened.

### Caring for yourself

Look after yourself, seek support within your whanau and friendship groups. These conversations are emotionally challenging and possibly the most difficult you will ever have.

Get outside support if you need to. Connect with people or organisations that can support your family.

### Further resources

Skylight: [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)

Kenzie's Gift: [www.kenziesgift.com](http://www.kenziesgift.com)

Starship Children's Hospital: [www.starship.org.nz](http://www.starship.org.nz)

Child bereavement UK:

[www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)

Winston's Wish: [www.winstonswish.org](http://www.winstonswish.org)

Thanks to Lorna Wood, Stephen Parkinson and Nigel Rowling for authoring this guide.

#### *Some principles of all COVID-19 guidelines produced by the Collaboration:*

As with all guidelines, they are designed to support decision making and best practice alongside individual assessment and ongoing reassessment as possible.

No one size fits all, and the guideline recommendations should be tailored to individual circumstances. If local guidelines are available, these guidelines can be used in addition as appropriate. In some instances, these guidelines may not necessarily be appropriate or fitting.

Whilst these guidelines are aimed specifically for people with COVID-19, the principles may also apply to people who are dying of other conditions too during a crisis.

Please do not share these guidelines on social media: the information may be sensitive to the public if not given the appropriate context.

Please feedback with your experience, and what else needs to be added or changed, as we learn more about how best to help people needing palliative care in a COVID-19 pandemic. Please email [rachel@hospice.org.nz](mailto:rachel@hospice.org.nz)