

## Parenting Solutions: Death and Dying

How do we introduce the topic of death and dying to young children? Many adults are uncomfortable with the issue and therefore have a difficult time explaining it to their children in a non-scary way.

### *What do other parents do?*

Some parents are very matter-of-fact about death: everybody is born, and everybody dies. We hope that we will die when we are very old, but sometimes accidents or illness happen. Others gloss over the issue and refer to a deceased person as “they are in a better place.” Families with pets can use the animal’s death as an introduction—goldfish come in handy for this purpose.

### *What do the pros say?*

Dr. Spock says that children often develop a fear of death around ages three and four. He recommends that when discussing death, initially keep it casual: “Everybody has to die someday, but we’ll be together for a very long time.” If a parent feels more comfortable with a religious angle, then including God in the explanation can be helpful. Louise Bates Ames, author of “Your Four-Year-Old,” says that many four-year-olds think of death as reversible and cannot quite grasp what it means. She says to offer reassurance that the child and loved ones will be OK—although she says to use loose language just in case tragedy does strike.

Dr. Spock does not recommend using the phrase “going to sleep” or, in the case of a pet, “put to sleep.” The reason is that children can confuse sleep with death and subsequently develop a fear of sleep. He suggests explaining that the vet gave the pet a special medicine that makes the pet’s heart stop beating without causing pain and makes the pet dead. Children will pick up on how a parent is feeling about death. If you consider death with dignity and strength, then your child will too.

So make sure you are comfortable with death—at least as comfortable as you can be. Keep the conversation casual and open, and help your child understand this part of the life cycle at his or her own developmental level.