

# Supporting Children and Teens in the Family

Explaining death to children and teens can feel overwhelming. Child life specialist and social workers can help. Use these ideas and advice based on the child's and teen's age:

## Infants and toddlers:

- Are best supported with a comforting presence and a regular routine
- Don't understand death but can sense an adult's feelings
- Often respond to stress through crying, irritability, separation anxiety and trouble sleeping

## Preschoolers:

- Are best supported with simple, honest explanations, and by validating their feelings.
- Don't understand that death is permanent (e.g., they will say that someone died, but then ask when the person will come back)
- May believe they caused the death (e.g. "I was so mad at Grandma and wanted her to die, so it's my fault she died.")
- Often respond to stress through changes in behavior, schoolwork, friendships, etc.

## School-age children:

- Are best supported by answering questions honestly and letting them lead the conversation
- May ask detailed questions
- Often respond to stress through changes in behavior, schoolwork, friends, etc.
- Start to understand that death is final and happens to everyone

## Teenagers:

- Are best supported by friendships, sticking to a routine and talking openly
- May form their own beliefs about death
- Often respond to stress through risky behaviors, withdrawal or habit changes
- Understand that death is permanent

### For children of all ages, keep the following tips in mind:

1. Be curious, honest and keep answers simple.
2. Let them know it's normal to feel what they are feeling.
3. Share memories or do activities that honor your family member.

### Questions to invite conversation:

1. "Sometimes I feel sad. Do you ever feel that way, too?"
2. "When you feel worried or upset, what helps you?"
3. "What can we do together to feel better?"