

End-of-Life Conversations

Talking with children when someone they love is dying

Goals

- Support parents/caregivers to talk honestly with children.
- Reduce children's confusion, isolation and self-blame.
- Help families plan what matters most.

How parents may present

- Unsure *if/how* to tell the child.
- Want to “protect” the child from distress.
- Afraid of saying the “wrong” thing or breaking down.
- Different perspectives about what the children should know.

1 Elicit: What do they know and fear?

To parents

Can you tell me what you understand about why [relative] is in hospital/so unwell?

What are you most worried about – for yourself, and for [child's name]?

What have you explained to [child's name] so far? What words have you been using?

If child present
(with parent's agreement)

Can you tell me what you know about why Mum/Dad/Grandma is so unwell?

KEY IDEA

To parents
Start from their understanding; look for gaps in information and misunderstandings.

2 Share: Clear, Kind, Honest Information

Modelling language for parents

Your mum is very, very ill, and the doctors don't have any treatments or medicines that can make her better.

When someone is this ill, their body starts to slow down. They may not be able to talk or walk, but they can still hear you.

This means her body will stop working, her heart will stop beating, and she won't be able to breathe anymore. That is called dying.

If more indirect words are needed:

She is coming to the end of her life.

She is so sick that the doctors don't think she will get better.

KEY IDEA

Simple, concrete words; small chunks; pause often.



Making conversations easier

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3 G.I.V.E: Address emotions

Get & Identify

I can hear this is really hard to talk about.

You look really worried. Lots of parents feel unsure how to talk with their child.

Validate & Explore

Tell me more about what you're most worried about – for yourself, for [child's name], or for [relative].

It makes sense that you feel sad or angry.

KEY IDEA

Notice feelings; name and validate them; "I can see how difficult this is. I am so sorry."

4 Plan: How to talk with the child and say goodbye

With parents

Some parents like to talk to their child themselves; others prefer someone with them or help with the words. What would feel most helpful for you?

We can think together about what you'd like [child's name] to know now, and what could wait until later.

Some children like to visit; others prefer to send pictures or letters. What might feel right for [child's name]?

OPTIONS

Brief visits; drawings/letters/recordings; calls; simple rituals (movie night, cake, memory box).

5 Common questions about time

When is Mum going to die? Will she be here for my birthday?

Younger child

That's a really important question. I wish I could tell you exactly, but we can't. We hope she'll still be here, but we just don't know.

What we can do is make sure you have special time with her now. Maybe we could do something together, like have a cake or do something you both enjoy.

Older child/young person

Some people in your mum's situation live for a few days, some for a few weeks, sometimes longer. I wish I could give you a definite answer, but I can't.

We can think together, with your mum, about what would feel important to do now – some families choose to celebrate or do something meaningful a bit earlier.

6 Close & follow up

Summarise

So today we talked about how [relative]'s illness is getting worse, that the doctors have done everything they can, and how you might explain this to [child's name] and spend time together.

Check & plan

Is there anything you were wondering that we haven't talked about yet?

After we've talked, how are you feeling about talking to [child's name]?

We'll check in again on... and you can ask to speak with us sooner if you need to.

Self-care line for parents

Looking after yourself – even in small ways, like eating, resting or getting some fresh air – will also help you support [child's name]. It's okay to ask for help.