

Why Do 4-Year-Olds Love Talking About Death?

Easter may bring up dark questions from your preschooler. Here's how to answer them.



By Jessica Grose

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When our older daughter was 4, it seemed like she was asking us about death constantly. These questions were apropos of nothing; we hadn't had a death in the family or lost a pet. What was jarring was her matter-of-fact tone. We'd be sitting at dinner and she'd ask a barrage of questions in a completely neutral voice: "When are you going to die? Is Grandma going to die first because she's old?" And on and on. I tried to calmly match her tone and answer her honestly, but sometimes you just want to eat your salad without contemplating your own mortality.

At the time, I was slightly worried that there was something wrong with her — at best she was a proto-goth who would be really into the Cure as a teenager; and at worst, her questions meant she had some troubling anxiety that was emerging through a fixation on death. But when I started talking to other parents, I learned that their preschoolers were also asking tons of questions about death at awkward moments.

A lot of parenting questions boil down to: Is this a thing, or is something wrong? So I decided to start an occasional series explaining why certain things seem to happen to your kid (or to your body or your relationships) as your child grows. For this edition, I asked three psychologists, two of whom have done research on children and their understanding of death, about why preschoolers ask a lot of questions about death, and how to best answer them. If you have a question for a future "Is this a thing?" newsletter, email me here.

Why do kids start asking about death in preschool?

Preschool is the age of "why" in general, said Dr. Lauren Knickerbocker, Ph.D., a child psychologist at N.Y.U. Langone's Child Study Center. And what adults sometimes don't realize, because we're inured to it, is that our kids are surrounded by death all the time: Cartoon characters die, the leaves on the trees die, an ant they smushed at the playground is dead.

Because they're already so curious about the world, they see our reactions to their questions about death — our faces may blanch — and they pick up on that and want to dig deeper.

What do they understand about death at 4?

There are four subconcepts of death that psychologists have identified, explained Dr. Sally Beville Hunter, Ph.D., a clinical assistant professor at University of Tennessee, Knoxville: nonfunctionality (your body doesn't work anymore), universality (all living things die), irreversibility (once you die, you can't come back to life) and inevitability (you can't avoid death).

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Though children pick up these concepts at different ages, depending on their cognitive abilities and their life experiences, at 4, the subconcept they tend to understand first is nonfunctionality, Beville Hunter said. Because it's straightforward, many preschoolers can understand that when you're dead, your arms and legs don't move anymore, and your heart stops beating.

"We're all gonna die" is something that's a bit harder for a 4-year-old (or let's be honest, a 37-year-old) to fully internalize. But according to Beville Hunter, many kids will understand all four subconcepts somewhere in the 7-10 age range.

How do I answer their many, many questions about death?

Do not use euphemisms. Children in the 3-6 age range have very concrete thinking, said Dr. Dunya Poltorak, a pediatric medical psychologist in private practice in Birmingham, Mich. If you say something like, "Grandpa passed away" instead of "died," it may confuse your child. She may think, "Did they go away somewhere? Are they on a trip? Did they pass over the border into Canada? It can just

potentially risk greater confusion and lack of understanding,” said Poltorak. So use the term “died,” even if it feels harsh.

Try to respond simply and clearly. Don’t brush off their questions even if they make you uncomfortable, said Poltorak. And you don’t need to get into too much detail with kids this age, said Beville Hunter. So for example, if your child asks you, “When are you going to die?” You can say, “I try to take very good care of myself and to be careful and plan to live a very long time until I’m quite old,” Poltorak suggested. If kids have follow-up questions, they will ask.

If your kids are endlessly curious about death in a nonanxious way, you can take them on a tour of a cemetery, Beville Hunter suggested. It’s something she did with her own children. “We went around and read the names on the gravestones, we did etchings, we looked at the numbers and talked about the age they were when they died,” Beville Hunter said. It opens up a space for your kids to get answers to many of their pressing questions.

If a kid is anxious about death, “I would assure them of safety, health and everything within your family dynamic, then I would try to redirect from there,” said Poltorak. Try classic distraction after addressing their questions clearly — *let’s go paint!* Or, *why don’t we read a book?* If a kid is really ruminating and you’re concerned because his anxiety is affecting his quality of life, talk to your pediatrician. Your child’s doctor may recommend a pediatric psychologist. “It’s always good to intervene young when children have anxiety,” Poltorak said.

When you have a death in the family, Knickerbocker and Poltorak both recommend that grieving children memorialize loved ones with art projects. They emphasized the concreteness of preschoolers’ thinking, so having something to work on like a scrapbook of memories of that person is helpful.

If your religious beliefs include an afterlife or resurrection like in the Easter narrative, again, try to address any questions straightforwardly. You don’t need to overexplain or answer questions that weren’t asked, said Beville Hunter. Poltorak, who is Catholic, said she talks to her children about heaven and tries to keep it light. Her father, who was very close to her children, died recently. He used to bring candy over to their house all the time, so Poltorak tells them, “Grandpa is probably up in heaven giving Jesus cavities.”

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Want More on Preschoolers’ Development and Talking to Kids about Death?

- A fascinating op-ed from the Times last year takes on kids and lying. Just as it’s normal for your 4-year-old to talk about death, it’s also perfectly normal for your preschooler to lie, and it may be a (completely infuriating) sign of intelligence.
- Fatherly has an excellent roundup of kids’ TV shows that help explain death and dying to your small ones. My personal fave is the classic Mr. Rogers episode “Death of a Goldfish.”
- Maria Russo, the Times children’s book editor, recommends “The Flat Rabbit,” which she called “a quietly profound” picture book that deals with the death of a stranger straight-on.

Tiny Victory

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