Should a child be allowed to visit?

Ideally, ask the child what they would like to do. Offer them choices and alternatives if they choose not to visit e.g. sending a message, letter or picture. If they choose to visit, carefully talk to them beforehand, offer information about changes, or what is different since they last saw the person e.g. 'mummy is a lot sleepier now and can't talk to you but she can hear you and will know that you're there' or 'dad's breathing sounds quite noisy but it doesn't mean that he's in pain.'

Try to encourage your child to ask questions and talk about how they're feeling. Reassure your child that you will be there to support them. If you're unsure about what to say, talk to someone you trust.

This is a very difficult and painful time for you. Try to remember that the support and reassurance that you give to your child now will help them to adjust and cope in the months and years to come. Be as honest and open as possible, within age appropriate limits.

OCM-012364 JUL'24

Talking to children when someone is dying

To be used as a resource for parents/carers for talking to children when a close friend or relative's death is near.

Talking to a child and explaining that a close relative or friend is very ill and nearing death can be very difficult and daunting. You may be struggling to adjust and accept the news that you have been given and you may feel confused or unsure how to tell your child. However, it's important that you try to help your child to understand what's happening. Keeping them involved will help them in the long term.

Where should I tell a child?

Sometimes, you may have no choice but to tell a child at the hospice or hospital. If this is the case, ask the staff if there's a quiet room or area where you can speak privately with the child. It may be helpful to have another adult with you who can support you all if needed. If you're at home choose a familiar and quiet area where you can give your child your full attention without distractions. Try to avoid bedtimes if possible.

How do I start the conversation?

Start with what your child already knows or has been told e.g. 'you know that mummy has been very ill over the past few weeks...' or 'you remember we talked about dad's cancer...'

How do I tell a child that someone is dying?

Be honest and keep explanations brief and to the point. Give small pieces of information and check out your child's understanding. Try to avoid using words or phrases which may be even more frightening to your child e.g. 'mummy is going to sleep forever.' This may seem gentler but can cause more confusion and distress. Be truthful, it's better to say, 'we don't know' than to give details which may be uncertain.

How do I explain what dying means?

A child's understanding will depend on their age, maturity and previous experiences. It may be helpful to access specific information. As a general rule, it's important to stress that death occurs when a person's body stops working. You may wish to talk in the context of your religious or spiritual beliefs.

What if I get upset when I'm talking?

Don't worry if you become tearful and upset, it shows your child that it's okay to cry. If you feel very overwhelmed by your feelings, it may be helpful to enlist the support of another family member, friend or a member of staff.