

Are we prepared to talk to our children about dying and death?

Note: This article is the fourth in the series of articles by the Irish Hospice Foundation concentrating on the Peoples Charter on Dying, Death and Bereavement in Ireland which came about through the views of over 3000 people (and counting) who have filled in a survey. In response to the results of the study the Irish Hospice Foundation is developing a series of posts to address each issue highlighted by the people of Ireland to promote dialogue, and interest on these difficult and emotive subjects.



I will not wade into the current controversy on the @loganpaul debacle, but I will dip in my toe. The amount of interest this one young man generates in my house is astounding. Unwittingly, this interest has opened up some earnest conversations on death by suicide, the power/harm of the internet and dying and death in general.

For those of you who don't know anything about him, Logan Paul is a 22-year-old vlogger, who has an army (over 15 million) of young followers. He sells cool 'merch' (merchandise) and most of the time the content he posts is him and his posse having fun, playing pranks, spending money and 'flexing' which - for the uninitiated - is showing off his cars, houses, watches, school buses and other grandiose items gained from making YouTube and Vimeo videos.

All of that changed on New Year's Eve 2017 when he and his crew went into a 'suicide wood' in a province of Japan and happened upon a young man who had died by suicide. They filmed the scene, while laughing and commenting, edited the film and uploaded it to share with his over 15 million followers. Cue the outrage, the worried parents who became aware of what their children were watching on the internet, myself included. What was he thinking?

I am not sure that he was anticipating the number and depth of conversations he prompted at our kitchen table. The questions were many. Why do people die by suicide? Was that really a dead body? How did they know he had died by suicide and had not been murdered? My sons' curiosity had been aroused and they wanted answers.

Whether we like it or not, our children are connected intimately to the web and are interacting in this brave new world in ways that perhaps we are not. Logan Paul has inadvertently opened a Pandora's box of discussions in and around problematic topics. My children did recognise that this was something to talk about on this occasion. (Disclaimer: I do appreciate that my children may recognise that their mother talks about dying, death and bereavement on a regular basis. They watch me write articles and have seen the few little films I have made about the subject, so the door is already ajar for them to talk.) I find it fascinating that of ALL the opportunities they have to speak they choose this one, and in the 5 or six weeks since the vlog was loaded onto YouTube we talk about their thoughts on this particular incident almost every day.

So this article's purpose is actually twofold. It is looking at what we can say to our children when they talk us about dying and death. It is also written as a response to the 3000 people who filled in the Irish Hospice Foundation's 'Have your say survey' in 2016/7. They too had some points they wanted The Irish Hospice Foundation to explore.

'Let's take the taboo out of death,' said one person,

'Let's make pathways together with schools, medical advisors, friends and families,' another said.

'We need to start talking about death earlier and not being afraid of it,' commented someone else and 'We need to prepare ourselves and all family members by talking, to get used to the idea.'

These are just a few of the comments on this major theme from our survey. It appears that we as a society, young and old, do not talk about these topics enough and conversations on dying, death and grief should start *early* with our children at home and through education as an integral part of the curriculum.

But what can you do, where do you start?

I'm not saying jump in immediately, but deal with it when the subject comes up as it did with my kids. And definitely, if you are faced with a death or a severe illness in the family, in the community, or in a movie or a book, do take the opportunity and talk about it directly. Think about what is appropriate for the age of the child. There is no need to labour the points that you may struggle with such as treatment options, or arguments for and against specific medical treatments, you will probably lose your audience. But you can explain that a grandparent/friend/person is seriously ill and is not expected to live much longer. And you can explain that although very sad, dying, serious illness and death happen, and **we get through being sad by talking, helping and supporting each other.**

Top 5 Tips

1. **Try to leave the conversation open:** encourage questions. It often helps if you talk about your own fears, sadness and confusion. It lets them know it's okay for them to have similar feelings. Remember there is no 'timeline' in discussing death and loss. Death and dealing with its aftermath is a process that never ends. Young people, like us, may have questions, concerns and feelings for many years.
2. **Be ready to talk at all times:** Most of the time kids want to talk when you are not available when you are on the phone, busy or distracted. This opportunity might never revisit you again, so put down the phone, iPad, book, and engage.
3. **Use real words...** this is my personal *bugbear*. People are NOT lost, passed, gone to sleep, with the angels. You cannot soften death. You must be clear. And there are really good reasons why:

A few months ago I heard a story from a young woman whose mother had died when she was 6 years old. A well-meaning aunt had pointed to the sky telling her “look your mam is going to heaven”. She could not see her mum and so could not understand what her aunt was talking about. She spent the next 12 years struggling with thinking her mum had not gone to heaven, and she had no idea where she was. Another person told me when she was a child and her mother died and a well-intentioned person told her that her mother was actually in a better place and was happy, ‘I was furious with my mother for years. I could not get over the fact that she would leave and be happy without me,’ she said.

What you say matters.

4. If there is an opportunity for them to get involved let them. If a relative is sick bring them to see them. They can put hand cream on hands, comb hair, go and get things; they can help. Let them attend funerals and wakes if they want to. Children are curious and respectful, they seem to instinctively know what to do. Sometimes we should trust them. If they are unsure they will look to us for guidance.

5. Help them create memories. If someone has died who is close to a child, help them build a memorial. This could be a picture to put into the coffin, or the opportunity to pick some flowers. Older children might want to create a scrapbook, a photograph album or write a poem/song.

Finally, try to remember that ultimately it's our job as adults to help them through even if we are finding it hard to talk about it. If you can, be a bit more open and a little less fearful. You will do something that will benefit the younger generation for years.

We would love to know your experiences - good and bad. Share with us what worked for you or didn't work for you when you were a child if you experienced a death or a serious illness.

Are you interested in more resources on the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network? Click [here](#)

[Download the Charter](#) and put in your workplace, you too can start a conversation

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