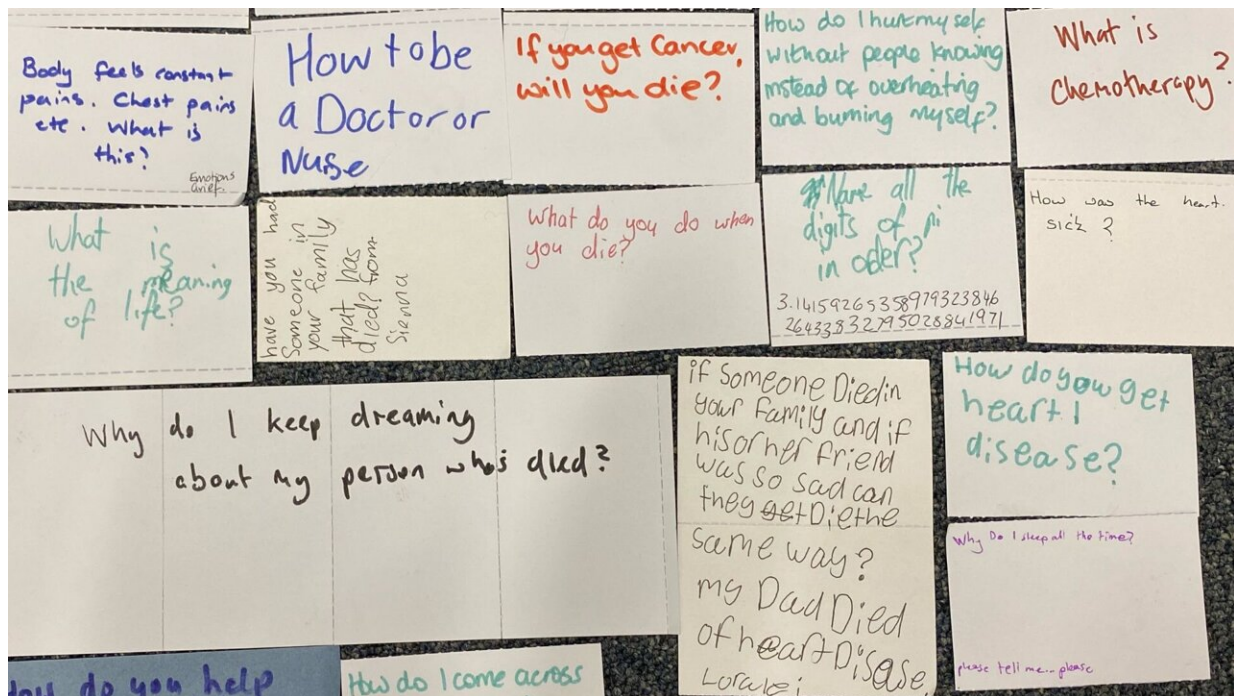


Children in mourning are curious about death, grief and afterlife, study finds

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Credit: Curtin University

New Curtin University–led research has found that children who have experienced the death of a loved one will benefit from gaining a better understanding about why and how people die and how to make sense of this.

The research, published in the [*Journal of Child and Family Studies*](#),

asked 220 bereaved children aged between 5 and 12 who attended one of 10 Lionheart Camp for Kids to submit questions about [death](#) and [grief](#) to better understand their curiosity and feelings about these important life events and changes. The paper is titled "What children want to know about death and grief."

The research identified that children were most curious about why and how people die, how death can be prevented or delayed, how to make sense of death, understanding and managing grief, understanding life and death, how medical interventions work, and what happens after you die.

Lead researcher Professor Lauren Breen, from the Curtin School of Population Health, said the children's questions in this study offered important insights into their thoughts and feelings, as well as their curiosity about death following the loss of a loved one.

"Approximately 5% to 7% of children in Western countries will experience the death of a parent or sibling before the age of 18, increasing to 50% when including the loss of a close family member or friend. Bereaved children are also at a higher risk of developing anxiety, depression, poor academic performance, [suicidal thoughts](#) and engaging in substance use," Professor Breen said.

"These statistics are alarming and have only increased following the rise of COVID-19, where an estimated 1.1 million children worldwide experienced the death of a parent in the first 14 months of the pandemic. It is critical to ensure effective and appropriate strategies are in place, such as camps like Lionheart Camp for Kids, to support grieving children, while also ensuring parents have the best tools to help them cope with the death of a loved one.

"Our study was able to show that children who are experiencing the death of a loved one are curious about death and may want to openly

discuss their feelings and ask questions to better understand why someone close to them is no longer around and how they can best cope with this major life change."

Some of the questions asked by children included: Why did he leave me? How does the body actually die? Why do kids bully me at school now? What type of sicknesses can people die from? How does a pacemaker work? What is the meaning of life? What does it feel like to be in heaven?

Professor Breen explained that a lot of the information provided to grieving children by [health professionals](#) and in school is based on their age and their development, but it may be more appropriate to base these decisions on the child's curiosity and own level of understanding.

"Ensuring there is adequate support in place for grieving children is important to helping them manage their emotions, process the grief and provide them with a set of coping skills that will help them through the next stages of life," Professor Breen said.

"It is very challenging for many adults to openly discuss grief with their children when they are also experiencing the same grief and loss. Our research shows that instead of shielding children which may be the natural instinct, it may be more beneficial for caregivers who are anticipating a death of a loved one to have open discussions with their children about what is happening and what this means for them.

"Further research is needed to better understand the experiences and perspectives of grieving children. By understanding this, more appropriate strategies could be set in place to provide the right level of support in a [safe environment](#). This study shows that [support services](#) may benefit from considering not just what children need to know, but what they want to know about death and grief."

Lionheart Camp for Kids CEO and Founder Shelly Skinner said adults are often awkward when talking about death and grief, while children are curious and tend to have both general and in-depth questions about illness, the [physical process](#) of dying, what it feels like to die and what happens after we die.

"Lionheart not only offers children a safe space to explore their grief, but we also educate and support adults to have appropriate, connecting and healthy conversations with children. When [children](#) find their voice and can articulate and understand their personal experience of death and grief, they better understand their thoughts and feelings, allowing them to build resilience, connect with others and better prepare for future life challenges," Skinner said.

More information: Caitlin Joy et al, What Bereaved Children Want to Know About Death and Grief, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10826-023-02694-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-023-02694-x)

Provided by Curtin University

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