

Tips for Explaining Death To Children

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Many adults find it difficult to talk about death with children and it can be tempting to shield them from the pain. However, children need clear and comprehensible information about an impending death (whenever that is possible) and certainly after a death has occurred. Even young children need an explanation about what has happened to someone who is important to them. Below are some tips for explaining death to children.

- Prepare yourself before addressing the issue with the child.
- Begin by asking the child what he already knows: “Dad is not here. What do you think happened to him?”
- Give an honest, brief explanation and use direct language (dead, NOT gone, asleep, lost, or passed away): “Dad died today. His body stopped working. He can no longer breathe, or eat, or feel hungry or cold. We can no longer see him or touch him.”
- Young children need brief, simple, and repeated explanations. Don’t be afraid to repeat the same thing over and over—repetition helps children understand better. Plan to have many talks about the death, mourning rituals, feelings, etc.
- Answer questions honestly. If you don’t know the answer, it’s OK to say “I don’t know.”
- Listen to and validate the child’s feelings, and invite more (e.g.) “You miss Dad a lot. What do you miss most?”
- Invite dialogue about any questions or worries the child might have: “It’s normal to feel worried and mixed up. What questions or worries do you have about Dad?”
- Don’t be afraid to show emotion. If you grieve openly it gives permission for your child to grieve openly.
- Don’t try to rescue the child from the hurt; not talking openly about difficult issues and painful feelings shuts the child down.
- It is normal for children to think that they somehow caused the death. Alleviate guilt by repeatedly saying, “You did not make Dad die, and you cannot bring Dad back alive.”

- Alleviate child's fear that other family members will die soon too: "Most people live a long and healthy life. I expect to be around for a long time."
- Reassure the child he will be cared for: "There are lots of people who love and care about you. There will always be adults to take care of you, like Aunt Lisa."
- Keeping children informed will alleviate their anxiety. Explain the process that will be followed and what will happen next.
- Explain funeral and mourning rituals to children and allow them to participate: "The Viewing/funeral is a time to express our feelings and say goodbye to dad. Dad will be in a coffin which is a special wooden box. He may look like he is sleeping...The coffin will be buried in the ground. Because he is dead and his body stopped working, he cannot feel anything so he won't be scared to be buried in the ground. You may want to draw a picture to put inside the coffin."
- Ask children what they think about what you have said to make sure they have actually understood.
- Plan to have future discussions about details of the death as children express a readiness to hear more: "Now that you seem ready, I'd like to tell you some more about your Dad's death."
- Read books to children to help them understand (Centering Corporation has an excellent selection: www.centering.org)
- For further information refer to: [Great Answers to Difficult Questions about Death](#) by Linda Goldman

Supporting a Child Who Has Been Bereaved Through Suicide or Homicide

It is hard to talk about death, but when a loved one dies by suicide or homicide, it is even more difficult. Many parents believe it is best to shield children from the truth, that somehow this will protect them. More often than not, the opposite is true. Misleading children, hiding the truth, or lying to them about how someone died can do more harm than good. Here are some reasons why it is important to be open and honest with children about the details of the death:

-If adults avoid open discussion with children, this sends the message that it is not okay to talk and children will shut down.

- It is natural to spare children from the truth by making up another explanation. However, children often find out the truth by accident by overhearing a conversation, seeing it on the news, or even hearing about it from another child on the playground. It is better for children to be given accurate information by a caring adult rather than from rumor.

-If children are lied to and later they somehow learn the truth from someone else (or overhear a conversation) their trust in you can be difficult to regain. They might think, "If you lied to me about this, what else are you lying to me about?"

-When children are told the details of the death in a planned way by caring adults, it provides an opportunity to process their feelings, answer their questions, and reassure them that they are safe and will be cared for.

Below is a guideline that can be followed when explaining suicide or homicide to children. (The information below comes from books produced by Winston's Wish, an organization in the United Kingdom.)

- Give the explanation in 6 stages. These six stages may happen in the space of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or even years. The pace between the stages is often led by the child's needs and ability to understand. This in turn is affected by their age and developmental understanding. The pace will also be affected by the situation, for example the possibility of your child finding out what has happened from other sources. The five stages may be:

(1) Explain that the person has died

Example: *I have something really sad to tell you. Daddy died today.*

(2) Give simple details about how they died

Example for suicide: *Daddy died up on the hill by the trees.*

Example for homicide: *Daddy died on the corner outside the restaurant.*

(3) Explain how the person died

Example for suicide: *I have something I need to explain to you about how daddy died. There are many different ways that people die. Your daddy had a disease called depression. When someone has depression their brain is not thinking right. And sometimes the depression makes them so sick that they do not want to live. So they do something to make their body stop working. Suicide is when*

someone chooses to die, so they make their body working. I wish it wasn't true. But I am sad to say that this is how your daddy died.

Example for homicide: I have something I need to explain to you about how daddy died. There are many different ways that people die—like through illnesses or accidents. Sometimes—and it hardly ever happens, one person does a very bad thing and kills another person. The police believe that daddy was killed by another man. Daddy and this man had a fight and the other man lost his temper and used a knife to kill daddy. I wish it wasn't true. But I am sad to say that this is how your daddy died.

- (4) Provide a more detailed description of how the person died.

Example for suicide: He went to a quiet place in the country and took a piece of rope with him. He climbed the tree and tied one end of the rope around his neck. Then he jumped. The rope pulled very tight around his neck and stopped him breathing. This is how he died.

Example for homicide: He was stabbed with a knife in his stomach. This made him bleed a lot which made his heart stop working. He was taken to the hospital but the doctors could not save him. This is how he died.

- (5a) (In cases of suicide) Explore possible reasons why the person chose to kill themselves.

Example: Daddy had been feeling very sad for a long time and because his brain was not working right, he could not figure out a way to feel better. So he felt the only way to stop his sadness was to end his life. But if his brain was working right, he would have been able to figure out a way to feel better.

- (5b) (In cases of homicide) Explain the process that will be followed.

Example: The police have worked very hard to find out exactly what happened. They found the person who killed daddy and they put him in jail. In a few months there will be a trial, which means that the judge will hear the story of what happened and decide what should happen to the person who killed daddy, like if he should stay in jail. (Closer to the court date, it will be important to explain additional details of the court process, and to explain words such as defendant, jury, judge, lawyer, evidence, witness, verdict, and sentence.)

- (6) Provide reassurance.

Example: I know this is all very scary. But I will take care of you and I promise to do my best to help keep you safe.

This process takes time. It needs to be handled with care, giving the children the chance to say how they are feeling. You may want to ask your child if they would like to know more details and then be guided by their response. If a child says they don't want to hear more just now, they need to know that they can come back to you for more information. Then again, you may feel that your child cannot handle any more details at the moment. It is important then to tell your child that you will tell them more on another occasion—and to do this. Usually if a child asks a question about what happened, they are ready to hear the answer.

There is no easy or set way to tell your child something as difficult as the fact that their loved one has died by suicide or homicide. Conversations like these will be difficult and upsetting for everyone but afterwards you'll feel relieved you were able to be honest and able to give your child a solid foundation of trust in you.