

Tips for Explaining Death To Children

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- 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.

Sample explanation for Suicide:

"I have something very sad to tell you--Your mom died this morning. She killed herself. The word for this is suicide. This means that she chose to die and so she took a lot of pills to make her body stop working. She was very unhappy and she didn't know how to talk to anyone about how bad she was feeling. It's important that you know that your mom loved you very much and it wasn't anything you did that made her feel so bad. You may feel sad or worried or confused, or other feelings. Just remember that you can ask questions and talk about how you're feeling whenever you want to."

Sample explanation for Homicide:

"People die for lots of different reasons, like through illnesses or accidents. Sometimes, and it hardly ever happens-one person kills another person. This is how your brother died. He was arguing with another man and your brother was shot with a gun. You may feel afraid that something else bad will happen; let's talk about ways to help you feel safe."