Talking with Children about Death

Liana Lowenstein, MSW (email) lianalowenstein@gmail.com (web) www.lianalowenstein.com

It can be difficult and stressful to talk about death. However, children cope better when their caregivers talk with them about the death in an honest and age-appropriate manner. When children learn difficult information from their caregiver in an honest, supportive, and caring manner, it fosters trust between children and caregivers and lays a foundation for open communication. It also helps children develop a more realistic understanding of life and death, which can contribute to their overall well-being.

Death from suicide, murder, or drug overdose can be even harder to talk about. Families may feel shame, guilt, anger, and/or confusion. These feelings make the grieving process more painful. Below is some information to guide you.

The Benefits of Telling Your Child

You may believe it is best to shield your child from the truth, that somehow this will protect them. However, hiding the truth about how the person died can do more harm than good. Here are some reasons that it's important to be open and honest with children about how the person died:

- Children are sensitive to change and will pick up that something is happening in their family that they don't know about. This makes them anxious.

- If adults avoid open discussion with children, this sends the message that it is not okay to talk about death or what happened. Children might then shut down and keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves.

- When not given all information, children make up stories in their minds, often blaming themselves.

- If children are not told the truth and they eventually find out what actually happened (as they almost always do), it can be difficult to regain their trust. They might think *If you lied to me about this, what else are you lying to me about?*

- It is natural to spare children from the truth by making up another explanation. However, children often find out the truth by overhearing a conversation, seeing it on the internet, or hearing about it from someone else. It is better for children to be given accurate information by a caring adult rather than hearing rumors or learning information from someone else.

- When children hear the truth directly from you first, you can help shape their thinking about it. When children are told the details of the death in a planned and appropriate way, it provides an opportunity to help them process their feelings, answer their questions, and reassure them that they are safe and will be cared for.

- Creating an environment of secrecy sends a message to children that death should not be discussed and increases shame related to the death.

- Talking with children about difficult issues and helping them process the information equips them to handle tough situations in the future. It sends the message that you are a safe person to talk to about difficult topics.

How to Talk with Your Child

You might feel nervous about having this talk with your child or feel unsure about what to say. Here are some tips:

- Have this talk when your child is not tired, hungry, or upset with you.

- Avoid having this discussion at mealtime or bedtime so it does not get associated with eating or sleeping.

- Identify a comfortable, quiet, private space.

- Provide your child with physical comfort while talking with them—for example, gently rub their back.

- Don't be afraid to show emotion. If you grieve openly, it gives your child permission to grieve openly. Put words to your emotions and offer reassurance—for example, "I'm crying because I am sad that (___) died. But even though I feel sad, I can still take care of you."

- Show that you are listening by making and keeping eye contact, nodding, and repeating or paraphrasing what they have said.

- Begin by asking your child what they already know—for example, "Mommy is not here. What do you think happened to her?"

- If your child wasn't initially told the truth about the cause of death, then begin by saying "I didn't tell you the truth about how (___) died because I didn't know what to say. But I got help, so now I'm ready to tell you what really happened."

- Provide an honest, short, simple explanation of what happened, using words your child will understand. Use direct language (*dead*). Avoid terms like *gone*, *asleep*, *lost*, *transitioned*, or *passed away*. As children get older, they need increasing amounts of information and details about the death. Therefore, provide your child with an account of the death that you can add information to, not one that you have to replace with a new explanation.

- While it is not helpful for the child to be lied to regarding the cause of death, it is also important not to provide too many details that are overwhelming for younger children to process. For example, it is usually not necessary or helpful to tell children details that are gory or graphic, that the person suffered, or that helpers did not do all they could to save the person.

- If your child is old enough to understand more details, ask whether they would like to know more and then be guided by their response. You may worry about the detrimental impact of sharing more details. However, it is better for children to hear the information from you in a planned and sensitive manner. If a child says they don't want to hear more just now, give them permission to come talk to you anytime.

- Listen to and validate your child's feelings (e.g., "It is normal to feel angry when someone dies"), and invite them to share more: "I know this is very hard. Tell me about your feelings."

- It is normal for children to think that they somehow caused the death. Alleviate guilt by repeatedly saying "Nothing you said or did caused (___) to die."

- Alleviate your child's fear that other family members will die soon too: "Most people live a long and healthy life. If I were to die before you're grown up, there is a plan for you to be taken care of. But I expect to live for a long time."

- Ask children to summarize what you have said to make sure they have understood.

- Invite dialogue about any questions or worries your child might have: "It's normal to feel confused or worried. What questions or worries do you have?" Answer questions honestly. Usually, when a child asks a question about what happened, they are ready to hear the answer. If you don't know the answer, say "That's a good question but I don't know. If I find out I will tell you." Check in with your child periodically to ask about any questions or worries that have come up.

- Your child might ask the same question about the death over and over. This happens because they are trying to make sense of difficult information. Even if you have already answered their question, repeat your response calmly and patiently. Try not to challenge their memory (e.g., "Don't you remember, I already told you that?").

- Ensure that all caregivers, significant relatives, teacher, and other caring adults in the child's life use similar language when discussing the death with the child to avoid confusion.

- Plan to have future discussions about the details of the death as children express a readiness to hear more: "Now that you seem ready, I'd like to tell you more about how (___) died."

What to Say to Your Child

Below are some sample explanations. Keep in mind that each situation is different. Modify what you say so it is appropriate to your situation and your child's ability to understand.

***Begin with "I have something very upsetting to tell you…"

Sudden Death
"(___) had (a heart attack, an aneurysm). (___'s) body stopped working and (___) died."

Illness
"(___) had an illness called (___). The doctors tried but they couldn't make (___) better. (___'s) body stopped working and (___) died."

(Provide additional information related to the illness. Search online for guidance on what to say.)

Accident
"(___) was in a very bad (car, motorcycle) accident. (___'s) body was hurt very badly. (___'s) body stopped working and (___) died."

Murder
"(___) was murdered/killed when someone (shot, stabbed them/ran them over). They hurt (___'s) body so badly that they made (___'s) body stop working and (___) died."

If the perpetrator has not been identified, say "We don't know who killed (___). The police are looking for clues to try to find the person who did it. It's really hard not knowing who killed (___)."

If your child asks how the person was killed, then they are usually ready to hear more detail, or they may have overheard a conversation and want clarification. Provide an honest answer without sharing gory details—for example, "(___) got into a big fight and was killed by (___) with a (gun, knife)," Or "Someone with a gun shot a lot of people, and (___) was one of the people who was shot and killed." Although it is very difficult to say these words, it is best for your child to hear it from you, rather than overhearing a conversation.

Suicide
"(___) died by suicide. This means (___) made their own body stop working so that they would die."

If your child asks how they made their body stop working, then they are usually ready to hear more detail, or they may have overheard a conversation and want clarification. Provide an honest answer without sharing gory details—for example, "They used a (rope, gun) to stop their breathing." Although it is very difficult to say these words, it is best for your child to hear it from you, rather than overhearing a conversation.

Substance-Related Death
"(___) died of something called an overdose. (___) took too much (medicine) and it made (___'s) body stop working, so (___) died."

"(___) died of something called an overdose. (___) took too much of a drug called (heroine) and it made (___'s) body stop working, so (___) died."

"(___) drank more alcohol than was safe for their body and it made (___'s) body stop working, so (___) died."

Military Casualty/Line-of-Duty Death
"(___) died in a training accident when (___'s) helicopter crashed. (___) was hurt so badly that (___) died."

"What we think happened is there was a big explosion and (___) was hurt so badly that (___) died."

"(___) died trying to put out a fire. (___) was hurt so badly that (___) died."

Modifying What You Say
The above sample explanations are intended to provide you with some ideas on how to explain the death to your child. Please make changes in a way that fits your circumstances and child's level of understanding.

There is no easy way to tell your child something so difficult. Conversations like these will be upsetting, but afterward you will likely feel relieved that you were honest and able to build a foundation of trust.

Supporting Your Child at School

Talk with your child's teachers and other school staff about the death and how they can be supportive. Make sure your child knows whom you communicated with. Ask your child what they would like to share with their teachers, classmates, and others in the school. Give your child permission to share what happened using language that won't frighten their peers. For example: "My mom died from taking too many pills." "My brother was killed." "My dad died. That's all I want to say right now."