

Talking to Children About Traumatic Death



Explaining death to children can be difficult, particularly when the death is traumatic. With little time to prepare, you may not know how to begin a conversation with children about a death by suicide, murder or other violent death.

It's important that you give children accurate information, appropriate to their age and level of understanding. If possible, a parent or other trusted adult should give the news to the child. While you may want to protect children from upsetting details of the death, children need honest information. With young children you may have to limit how much you tell them. In this case, you might say something like, **"We can talk about this some more when you're bigger."** Children often pick up information from other sources and may know more about the death than you realise.

Immediately after the death

- **Explain that the person has died**

Use simple words and explain gently in a way that the child can understand

"Something really sad has happened, Mary died today."

With a small child you may need to bend down to be at their eye level. Don't use unclear phrases such as 'gone to sleep' or 'with the angels' as they can confuse the child.

- **Explain how they died**

Give general details about how the death occurred

"Daddy died in his car."

"Mary died because she took too many of her tablets."

This allows the child to begin to understand what happened and you can add more details later. Too many details can overwhelm a child, but if we leave out too much, children tend to fill in the blanks from their imagination. The child may ask questions or may not need to know anything more for the moment.

- **Explain that the person died by suicide**

That may sound harsh, but children need honest information and they will usually learn about the nature of the death from someone else. It helps them to know that they can trust you to tell them the truth and to answer any questions they may have. This also gives you a chance to talk about feeling sad and explain there are always other options, even when we think we are alone with our worries.

If possible, take a little time to rehearse what you want to say, as it can be difficult to find the right words. You could adapt the following example:

"There is something I need to explain to you about how your Daddy died. Sometimes people get very sad and their worries seem very big."

"That's how it was for Daddy. He thought that nobody could make things better. He got a bit mixed up and he thought the best thing to do was to end his own life."

- **Providing a more detailed account of the death**

Some children may be able to handle more details immediately. Most children need time to digest what they've been told and will come back with questions at a later time, as long as you give them the opportunity.

Remember the child is trying to piece together what has happened and to make sense of this change in their life. Use your judgement about how much detail to give them at this time. You can always say that you think that's enough for now and you can talk again soon.





- **Exploring why the person died**

It's important to take time with your child to talk about why someone died. Very young children often don't understand that people of all ages die and that there are many different causes of death. Sometimes it's unclear why someone died, or whether the death was accidental or intentional. Share this with the child and let them know that you may give them more information later. Sometimes we never know the full circumstances surrounding a death and you should tell children that too. For example:

“Well we know that Mammy died because she took too many of her tablets, but nobody knows for sure whether she meant to do that or whether she made a mistake.”

- **Making sense of loss**

Children ask the same questions over and over again. They may also ask questions that we struggle to answer, such as “**Why did God take Granny away?**”, “**Can Mammy still see me?**”, **Why didn't Daddy talk to you about his worries?**”

It's ok to tell children that you don't know the answer to some of their questions. You can explore with them what you believe and ask them what they think. One of the best ways to support a grieving child is to be willing to listen to their questions and worries and give them honest information. Children also need to know that adults grieve too and that you don't have all the answers.



Useful Resources

Irish Childhood Bereavement Network

www.childhoodbereavement.ie
icbn@hospicefoundation.ie

Irish Hospice Foundation

Further suggested reading is available from our Thérèse Brady Library,
library@hospicefoundation.ie

Bereavement & Loss Hub

www.bereaved.ie

Bereavement Support Line

Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm. In partnership with the HSE.

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