

HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT MURDER/HOMICIDE

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The sudden violent death of a family member or schoolmate can be very difficult for children to cope with or comprehend. Children perceive death differently at different stages of their development. The following information may be helpful to parents and caregivers in providing support to a child who has lost someone they care about in a violent manner.

1. TALK OPENLY AND HONESTLY WITH YOUR CHILD¹

- As soon as possible after the death, set aside time to talk with the child.
- Give the child the facts as simply as possible. Do not go into too much detail; the child will ask more questions if they come to mind.
- If you cannot answer the child's questions, it is okay to say, "I don't know how to answer that, but perhaps we can find someone to help us".
- Use the correct language, i.e., "dead", "murdered", etc. Do not use such phrases as "S/He is sleeping", "God took him/her to heaven", "S/He went away", etc.
- Ask questions. "What are you feeling?", "What have you heard from your friends?", "What do you think happened?", etc.
- Discuss your feelings with the child, especially if you are crying. This gives the child permission to cry too.
- Adults are children's role models, and it is good for children to see our sadness and to share mutual feelings of sadness.
- Use the deceased's name.
- Talk about a variety of feelings, e.g., sadness, anger, fear, depression, wishing to die, feeling responsible, etc.
- Talk about the wake/funeral, explain what happens, and ask the child if s/he wants to go. Include him/her, if possible.
- If your family has spiritual beliefs, talk to the child about them, including what happens to people after they die.
- Talk about memories of the deceased, both good and bad.

2. WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD COPE WITH THE LOSS

¹ Sections 1, 2, 3 and 4 are borrowed from the publication: "CHILDREN and HOMICIDE", written by Homicide Survivors, Inc., Tucson, AZ, online at:
http://media.wix.com/ugd//11784d_c8a440fe1c2148592d939da7f47475af.pdf .

- Read to the child about death. There are many good children's books available.
- Read a book about children's grief so you have a better understanding what your child is experiencing.
- Help the child write a letter to the deceased.
- Help the child keep a diary of his/her feelings.
- Invite your child and his/her friends, family members, etc. to plan a memorial for the deceased.
- Discuss rumors, media reports, etc., with the child so that s/he can clarify information regularly.

3. OBSERVE THEIR REACTIONS

- Be alert for reports or observations of "bad dreams". Talk about them with the child. Dreams are sometimes a way to discharge stress.
- Be alert for behavioral changes in your child. If they concern you, seek professional help.

4. UNDERSTAND HOW THEY FEEL

- Understand your child's level of comprehension and speak at that level.
- It may take some time for your child to understand the concept, "gone forever", especially if s/he is very young.
- Your child may think that s/he caused the death because s/he had been thinking bad thoughts or had been angry with the deceased just before the death.
- The sudden and unexpected death of a peer is especially difficult for a child to comprehend; children tend to feel invulnerable.

Rachel Burrell, Director of Fernside, a centre for grieving children, believes that it is a myth that children bounce back from tragedies. Their grief is cyclical, coming and going amid intervals of play. Children whose parents have been murdered exhibit a wide range of behavioural and developmental problems. They may suffer from psychosomatic ailments, such as headaches, stomach aches, dizziness and uncontrollable trembling. They may be teased or avoided at school. Their self-esteem may plummet and also their trust in authority. There is also evidence to suggest that children who are directly exposed to violence are much more likely to commit violent acts as adults.

Children who are dealing with loss, especially the death of a family member, are likely lacking the emotional maturity and coping capabilities to work through the grief. The death of a family member is a confusing and frightening experience for anyone, particularly for young children.

Children may respond differently to death depending upon the developmental stage they are in. It is important for adults to be honest, to listen, to be supportive and to be there for children during this difficult time. This will help to facilitate a healthy process of grieving.

Birth to One Year:

Some professionals believe that infants do not respond to death, as their memory capacity for relationships has not yet developed. Others believe that infants may feel anxiety and tension, as the death may interfere with their basic needs, i.e. sleeping and eating schedules.

One to Two Years of Age:

Children at this age cannot yet attribute meaning to death. They may experience displeasure or depression following the loss of their primary caregiver. Environmental change can provoke both positive and negative reactions among young children. They may react to the emotions and grieving of those around them.

Preschool Children: Three to Five Years of Age

Preschool children have a limited understanding of death. They believe that death is temporary and can be reversed. They perceive a dead person as asleep, gone away or broken. There is no understanding of personal death.

School Age Children: Six to Nine Years of Age

Children in this age group have a clearer understanding of death although they may still believe that it will not happen to them. Children at this age may be interested in the physical and biological aspects of death. Dealing with grief is difficult as school age children alternately confront and deny their grief. They may also be unprepared for the length of the grieving process.

It is common for children in this age group to experience:

- Denial
- Difficulty expressing their strong feelings of loss
- Difficulty eating and sleeping
- Physical ailments such as stomach aches and headaches
- Fearfulness
- Decrease in school performance
- Inability to concentrate
- Anger directed towards teachers or classmates
- Inappropriate classroom behaviour

Pre-adolescent and Adolescent: 10 to 18 Years of Age

Children in this age category have a more mature understanding of death and mortality. They understand that it is irreversible. They also understand personal death, although they may view themselves as immortal. These children may experience guilt, confusion, depression, shock, crying,

stomach aches, headaches, insomnia, exhaustion, dramatic reactions such as not sleeping or eating, decrease in school performance, change in peer group, possible drug use and/or sexual promiscuity.

Puberty further complicates reactions to loss and the grieving process. Children in this age category tend to be egocentric, and will thus concentrate on how the death has affected them - forgetting that others are also affected by the death. The loss of a parent at this age can be extremely overwhelming for a young person.