

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

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Range of emotional reactions vary from no reaction to indifference to concern to worry and anxiety.

- Some children will make fun of or play act. This is normal
- Your role will vary according to their needs.

Create safe environment where these discussions can occur—but don't force children to talk until they're ready

What children want/need:

- To know they're safe
- To know their parents are safe
- To know their needs will be met
- To know where to turn for comfort

Parents' role:

- You are a buffer, a protective shield, against unnecessary information and conversations
- You are an interpreter of what children hear or experience outside the home
- You are the source of their security: help them understand that sudden death, especially of a child, is very serious and sad but that it is very rare

Tools for helping:

- Start with yourself: how anxious are you? Limit child's exposure to your anxiety and be aware that you may become overly protective initially.
- Be certain you know the facts: a death in the community often results in a round robin of calls, emails, texts—and misinformation.
- Keep adult conversations among the adults. Young children should not be exposed to adult discourse. Remember they LISTEN when you're on the phone!
- Keep everything consistent and predictable. Children need structure. Keep routines, including school attendance and activities.
- Acknowledge & validate their feelings
- Let children know how you're feeling. It both validates their feelings & may explain if you're upset, worried, inattentive so that they don't personalize it.
- Don't force discussion. But if you feel child is worried, but not talking or denying it, make 'statement of assumption': What do you think other kids your age might be worrying about?

- Have faith in your child's ability to cope: they don't have same sense of history or future, so imagination won't take them to the same place. At same time:
 - Be prepared for short term regression: sleep; clinging; toileting
 - Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable. Watch for physical symptoms, provide extra support and attention. But don't change routines.

Things you shouldn't say or do:

1. Don't say "There's nothing to be sad about. "
2. Don't be surprised if children make light of or joke about deaths or injuries. Remember this is the age of computer games and graphic movies. It is OK to say "This isn't like the games you play or the movies you see" but they may or may not 'get it', depending upon ages
3. Don't make unrealistic promises, e.g. Promising that this won't happen to them or to anyone they know. But do say, this was very very rare, it was an (accident)(illness) that was unexpected. We're all plan to be together for a very long time.
4. Again, be sensitive to discussions with other adults and on the phone while your children are present: Children DO listen.

Things you can say or do:

1. What have you heard about your friend's death?
2. I understand how you could feel that way. Especially with older children: doesn't mean you agree, but communicates understanding, respects differences
3. DO know what's being said in and done in school

If your child is preoccupied with questions death, seek evaluation from qualified mental health professional. Your Principal and School staff can help you with referrals.