

Talking About Stigmatized Deaths with Children

While it makes absolute sense to want to shelter children from the truth about why a loved one died, failing to be honest with them (or intentionally concealing the truth from them) can cause children additional harm, can impair their trust in adults, and can damage the relationships between children and caregivers.

Why it is important to tell children the truth about the death of a loved one:

- It matters **who** your children hear this news from. In every circumstance, it is better for them to hear this information from you (a trusted adult who loves them) than risk them accidentally overhearing it from others (this pertains to both the death itself *and* the cause of death). It can be shocking what young children accidentally overhear from other well-meaning adults (whether healthcare workers, police/EMS, teachers, or conversations between adult friends and family). Overhearing the news of—or circumstances surrounding—a death from others instead of you can lead children to feel deceived and can damage their trust in you.
- Often times, children will “fill in the blanks” when there is missing information. When not given full information, children may make assumptions about the death that are as scary—or even scarier—than the truth. Having open and honest conversations with children allows you to correct any misconceptions they may have around their loved one’s death.
 - o Common misconceptions children have about death include:
 - They caused the death by something they did (e.g., being “mad” at the person who died or saying something mean to them) or something they failed to do.
 - *All* sicknesses and *all* injuries can cause death.
 - They could have prevented the death from happening.
 - Their loved one just disappeared and anyone (including them) could be next to die/disappear.
 - They can reverse the death and bring the deceased back to life through good behavior, wishing, or prayers.
- For a child, the only thing scarier than navigating sad or scary news is feeling completely alone as they work through this. Your honesty and compassionate presence reassures them that they are not alone, and that a loving adult is there to support them through this.
- Telling your children about the death, while painful, builds their trust in you as someone who is honest and reliable. It also teaches children that when scary/overwhelming/sad things happen in life, **you** are a safe person for them to navigate these experiences with.
- A child’s traumatic loss of a loved one can lead to fears and worries about losing **another** close loved one. Simply saying “*something bad happened and he went to heaven*” or “*she died because she was sick*” raises a lot of overwhelming questions in the minds of children, namely, “Will others I love—or will I—suddenly die because something ‘bad’ happens? Because we ‘get sick?’”
- **Children need to know that:**
 - o Death is **not** associated with *every* sickness or injury. Labeling the exact reason someone died (e.g., homicide, suicide, overdose) helps to distance the cause of death in this circumstance from *other* illnesses and injuries.
 - o There is a significant difference between sicknesses/injuries and fatal sicknesses/fatal injuries. This is why professionals suggest naming the cause of death. Just like a fatal heart attack is different than the common cold, so are stigmatized diagnoses of addiction, depression, etc.

Talking About Stigmatized Deaths with Children

Guidance for Discussing Death by Homicide/Violence with Children

Suggested language:

1. **Explain death first:** “She died. This means her heart stopped beating and her lungs stopped breathing. Her body stopped working all the way. When someone dies, they no longer breathe, eat, talk, move, sleep, or feel anything.”
2. **Explain the cause of death:** “Usually when we get hurt, our bodies heal and get better. But someone hurt her so badly that it made her body stop working all the way and she died.”

Helpful tips:

- **Share simple, concrete information (above) first. Let children guide the conversation from there based on the questions they ask.** It’s okay not to know all the answers.
 - o e.g., “How did they hurt her?”
 - ➔ “They shot her with a gun. This made her brain stop working and her heart stop beating. That is when she died.”
 - o e.g., “Why did they hurt her?”
 - ➔ “I don’t know. I wish I understood. We all get angry, but it is never okay to hurt others when we feel mad.”
 - o e.g., “Are we safe?” (answer this question honestly, only say “yes” if the perpetrator has been apprehended)
 - ➔ “The police caught the person who hurt her and they are in jail. They cannot hurt you or others while they are in jail.”
 - o If you get stuck on a question, it’s always okay to say, “I don’t know how to answer your question, but I’m so glad you asked. Let me talk to an expert who can help me explain this and we can talk about it more once I get some help.”
- This is a conversation that will likely unfold over multiple sittings. Children will often take breaks to process and may come back days/weeks later with additional thoughts and questions.
- Share this information in a location where the child feels safe. Monitor your child’s reactions and pause/take breaks as needed. Offer physical contact (hugs, holding) and comfort items (your child’s special blanket or stuffed animal) as appropriate.
- Do not have this conversation with children right before they are headed off to bed or leaving the house for school. Make sure your child has ample time to process, ask questions, and play after you share this news with them.
- The aforementioned suggestions are general examples. If you are seeking guidance specific to your family’s unique situation, it can be helpful to connect with a Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS). We are always happy to connect you with a local CCLS who can help.

Additional resource for discussing violent deaths with children:

- The Dougy Center: Supporting Children & Teens After a Murder or Violent Death:
<https://www.dougy.org/assets/uploads/Supporting-Children-and-Teens-After-a-Murder-of-Violent-Death.pdf>

Talking About Stigmatized Deaths with Children

Guidance for Talking about Death by Overdose with Children

Suggested language:

1. **Explain death first:** “She died. This means her heart stopped beating and her lungs stopped breathing. Her body stopped working all the way. When someone dies, they no longer breathe, eat, talk, move, sleep, or feel anything.”
2. **Explain the cause of death:** “She swallowed/used/took a drug* that was not meant for her. This made her heart stop working and she died.”

**Note: I avoid using the word “medicine” when explaining substance use, as there is a clear delineation between medicine (that is helpful) and drugs/substances (that are harmful)*

- **Share simple, concrete information (above) first. Let children guide the conversation from there based on the questions they ask.** It’s okay not to know all the answers.
 - o e.g., “What is a drug?”
 - ➔ “Medicines help people heal and get better when they are hurt or sick, but sometimes people swallow/take/use things that do not help their bodies and that can actually cause their bodies harm. We call these drugs.”
 - o e.g., “Why did they take/use a drug?”
 - ➔ “I don’t know. I wish I understood.” (Use this for when there is no evidence of addiction or previous drug use. If the person who died had a history of addiction, the answer below is more appropriate)
 - ➔ “They had a sickness in their brain called addiction. This made them think they needed to swallow/use this drug to stay alive. But really, the drug they swallowed/used caused their body to stop working and made them die. Usually when we get sick, we heal and get better, but addiction can be very serious. It is not contagious, so we can’t catch it. **It’s important you know that nothing you or I did caused them to get this sickness and to die.**”
 - o If you get stuck on a question, it’s always okay to say, “I don’t know how to answer your question, but I’m so glad you asked. Let me talk to an expert who can help me explain this and we can talk about it more once I get some help.”
- This is a conversation that will likely unfold over multiple sittings. Children will often take breaks to process and may come back days/weeks later with additional thoughts and questions.
- Share this information in a location where the child feels safe. Monitor your child’s reactions and pause/take breaks as needed. Offer physical contact (hugs, holding) and comfort items (your child’s special blanket or stuffed animal) as appropriate.
- Do not have this conversation with children right before they are headed off to bed or leaving the house for school. Make sure your child has ample time to process, ask questions, and play after you share this news with them.
- The aforementioned suggestions are general examples. If you are seeking guidance specific to your family’s unique situation, it can be helpful to connect with a Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS). We are always happy to connect you with a local CCLS who can help.

Talking About Stigmatized Deaths with Children

Guidance for Discussing Death by Suicide with Children

Some helpful information:

- A majority of people who die by suicide had a diagnosable mental illness at the time of their death. Just as people can die of other illnesses (cancer, heart disease, stroke) they can die of mental illness.
- Talking about suicide will **not** increase the risk that others will end their own lives. Rather, knowing the truth and having open conversations about mental illness increases the chances that someone will get the appropriate help if they are contemplating suicide.

Suggested language:

1. **Explain death first:** “He died. This means his heart stopped beating and his lungs stopped breathing. His body stopped working all the way. When someone dies, they no longer breathe, eat, talk, move, sleep, or feel anything.”
 2. **Explain the cause of death:**
 - “He made his body stop working. This is what caused him to die.”
 - “She died from suicide. This means that she made her body stop working.”
- **Share simple, concrete information (above) first. Let children guide the conversation from there based on the questions they ask.** It’s okay not to know all the answers.
 - e.g., “How did they die?”
 - ➔ “They made their heart stop beating and their body stop breathing.”
 - ➔ “They used ___ to make their body stop working.”
 - e.g., “Why did they do it?”
 - ➔ “I’m not sure. I wish I understood” (Use this when there is no evidence of a mental illness prior to death by suicide. If there is a history of—or suspected—mental illness, the answer below is most appropriate).
 - ➔ “They had a sickness in their brain called (name the illness: depression, bipolar disorder, etc.) that made them confused and they did not know they could get help. Usually when we get sick, we heal and get better, but this sickness was very serious. It is not contagious, so we can’t catch it. **It’s important you know that nothing you or I did caused them to get this sickness and to die.**
 - If you get stuck on a question, it’s always okay to say, “I don’t know how to answer your question, but I’m so glad you asked. Let me talk to an expert who can help me explain this and we can talk about it more once I get some help.”
 - This is a conversation that will likely unfold over multiple sittings. Children will often take breaks to process and may come back days/weeks later with additional thoughts and questions.
 - Share this information in a location where the child feels safe. Monitor your child’s reactions and pause/take breaks as needed. Offer physical contact (hugs, holding) and comfort items (your child’s special blanket or stuffed animal) as appropriate.
 - Do not have this conversation with children right before they are headed off to bed or leaving the house for school. Make sure your child has ample time to process, ask questions, and play after you share this news with them.

Talking About Stigmatized Deaths with Children

- The aforementioned suggestions are general examples. If you are seeking guidance specific to your family's unique situation, it can be helpful to connect with a Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS). We are always happy to connect you with a local CCLS who can help.

Additional Resources for discussing death by suicide with children:

- The Dougy Center: Supporting Children and Teens after a Suicide Death: https://www.dougy.org/assets/uploads/TDC_Supporting_Children_Teens_After_a_Suicide_Death_2018.pdf
- The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Children, Teens, and Suicide Loss: <https://aws-fetch.s3.amazonaws.com/flipbooks/childrenteenssuicideloss/index.html?page=1>
- "The words to say it: When a parent dies by suicide": <https://www.nancyrappaport.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-Words-to-Say-It.pdf>
- National Alliance for Children's Grief: Supporting Children who are Grieving a Death by Suicide Toolkit: https://nacg.org/resources_directory/supporting-children-who-are-grieving-a-death-by-suicide/