

1. Explaining that the person has died

Explain gently and simply using words the child understands.

‘Something really sad has happened. Mary died today. I’m sorry to have to tell you such bad news.....’

2. Explain simply how they died

Give general details of how the death occurred. This allows for the telling of part of the story which can be built on later.

‘Dad died in his car.’

‘Mam died because she took more of her tablets than she should have.’

The child may ask further questions. If they don’t it is good to ask if they need to know anything else right then.



For a child to lose a parent or a sibling can radically affect their life. When death is traumatic the child may develop particular stress reactions.

William Yule (2005)

3. Explain that the person chose to kill themselves - in the case of suicide

There is no set way to break this news but it needs to be rehearsed before talking with the child. The following explanation could be adapted for different situations:

‘There is something I need to explain about how your Daddy died. Sometimes people get very sad and down. Their problems and worries feel very big. They think that nothing they or anyone else can do will make things better. Then one more problem becomes too much and they can’t cope any more. They are confused and sometimes think that we would be better off without them. I wish they hadn’t thought like that.’

4. Providing a more detailed description

This is when the cause of death is described more fully. This allows the child piece together what has happened and avoids them having undue worries.

5. Exploring why the person died

If we know the reasons why someone died we can share them with the child when appropriate.



Talking with Children about Traumatic Death

‘A child will reevaluate what happened and their own involvement in what happened as they grow older, and have a fuller understanding of the long-term consequences of the event. Children process such losses over time with seemingly little attention to the death for periods of time punctuated by periods of active processing. Interventions can therefore be brief and focused on the issues concerning the child at the time.’

Kari and Atle Dyregrov (2005)

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Our leaflet **Children's Grief** explains the experience of children following a death. This leaflet informs how to deal with a child bereaved by traumatic death.

Death is always difficult for children but when death is due to an accident, suicide or murder it can be traumatic.

As adults, we need to support them and keep them safe at such a time.

- Parents or a trusted adult are best to tell the child that the death has occurred
- Give information appropriate to their age
- Use simple language and use the words 'dead' and 'dying'
- Be honest and open
- Be consistent let them know they can trust you to tell them the truth
- Allow the child express their feelings
- Prepare the child to view the body if they choose
- Let an adult the child trusts be with them at the funeral
- Make opportunities to talk where children can ask further questions
- Go from what is known to unknown
- Children fantasise to fill the gaps in information, they need honest explanations

Adults need to understand:

- Children's reactions to death
- The need for children to receive honest information about what has happened
- What children understand at different stages of development.
- How children cope with grief
- That children may:

Need to sleep in their parent's bedroom for a time

Become more clingy for a period

Behave as if nothing has happened

Need stability in daily routines



Consider the nature of the child and their relationship with the person who died

Stages Involved in Telling a Child: These stages may occur over minutes, hours, months or years depending on the child's needs and the family situation.

Immediately after the death:

1. Explain that the person has died

2. Explain simply the details of how they died

Later when there has been time to rehearse an explanation:

3. In the case of suicide explain that the person chose to take their own life

Prompted by the child's response and questions:

4. Provide a more detailed description of how the person died

5. Explore possible reasons why the person died

Rehearse what you will say. Have adult support close by when you are telling the child. Don't flood them with information. Allow them to set the pace by asking questions when they need to know something more.