

Children and Homicide

Following the murder of a loved one, in the time of grief that follows, it can be easy to forget children or avoid difficult conversations with them. You will face emotions and complications that will change not only your life forever, but theirs as well. The brutality of a murder impacts the future for the surviving family. If you are unable to provide for a child's needs because of your own grief, ask another adult to take care of the child until you feel better able to function. It can be helpful to have someone assist with caring for your children at your home during the early days.

You are encouraged to seek professional help and guidance. Your CTSS support worker can help you find the most appropriate professionals for your situation.

What to say to the children

- > Children should be told as quickly as possible what has happened. Use the deceased's name and correct language e.g. 'dead', 'murdered' etc.
- > Include the following information:
 - The person has died.
 - This is sad.
 - It is okay for them to talk about it.
 - They died because something happened to their body (for younger children explain 'dead' as the body stopped working).
 - It is okay for them to ask questions about death. You should be honest in answering any questions asked.
- > Avoid phrases like "went to sleep", "gone away," "passed on" or "left us" they can be misinterpreted.
- > Explain 'death' as the body no longer working (hair does not grow; the body does not get hungry or too hot or cold).
- > Tell them what to expect in the following days, who will take care of them, etc.
- > Tell them when the funeral will take place. Explain to them what a funeral is, what will happen, what they can expect. Children should be allowed to attend the funeral; however, they should not be forced to attend. Ask them what they want to do.

How to help a grieving child

- > Children generally find the concept of someone gone “forever” difficult. The concept is difficult to understand and they may have questions or difficulties for a while. Be prepared to explain and discuss things over and over.
- > Older children may understand that their loved one is gone but may have some problems or questions. Again, be prepared to explain and discuss as they are ready.
- > Encourage them to say “goodbye” in their own way. Perhaps writing a letter, drawing a picture, placing flowers on the grave, letting a balloon go into the sky etc.
- > Children can misread adult expressions of emotion, so be prepared to explain to them. For example – a child may think that their parent is crying because they (the child) are upset and crying. They do not understand that their parent is crying because they too miss the deceased. It is important to help them to continue to talk about the deceased and recall positive memories of them. Let them know it is okay to cry.
- > Your child may think that she/he caused the death because she/he had been thinking bad thoughts or had been angry with the deceased just before the death. Be prepared to reassure them this is not true.
- > Talk about a variety of feelings, e.g., sadness, anger, fear, depression, suicide (wishing) to die, feeling responsible for what happened, etc.
- > Talk with the child about your family’s spiritual beliefs, including what happens to people after they die.
- > Read to the child about death. There are many good children’s books available (see a few suggestions at the end of this section).
- > A young child’s reactions to death may be different from adults. They focus on grief for a short period of time, then play and laugh as a way to cope. They may act out death scenes to express their feelings. This behaviour is completely normal for a grieving child.
- > Return children to their normal routine as soon as possible after the death. The return to daycare or school shows that life continues on. The child’s teacher, caregivers, office staff/administration (e.g. the principal) should be advised to ensure that someone can assist if the child becomes upset.

Bereavement complications due to homicide¹

- > Set aside time to talk and give the facts as simply as possible. Do not go into too much detail; the child will ask more questions if they wish. If they do, then answer them.
- > 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.
- > Ask questions of them, “What are you feeling?”, “What have you heard from your friends?”, “What do you think happened?”, etc.

¹Adapted from: Children & Homicide – Homicide Survivors, Inc., Tucson AZ.
Visit their website at: <http://www.azhomicidesurvivors.org>

- > Discuss with the child rumors, media reports, etc., as they occur so that he/she can clarify for themselves the information. Discuss that they do not have to correct classmates or friends who may be talking about what happened.
- > 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 sadness and to share mutual feelings of sadness.
- > Parents can be so devastated by the murder that their ability to meet their children's emotional needs is limited. This can be more devastating to the child than the event itself.
- > Most children will not work through their bereavement immediately (or even within the first few years) but will do so during each subsequent developmental stage until adulthood and even beyond.
- > Toddlers may respond with heightened anxiety or agitated and aggressive behaviour, e.g., biting, crying, throwing objects, etc.
- > Children often act out traumatic events through play. They may demonstrate some challenging behaviours (clinging, demanding to be held, wanting to sleep with the parent, etc.) and regressive behaviour (bedwetting, refusing to dress themselves). Sleep disturbances and nightmares are also common.
- > Children may exhibit radical behaviour changes. They may exhibit uncontrolled behaviour, poor school behaviour, and physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- > Children who are amid adolescence may try to deny reality by suppressing their emotions. Older adolescents may become judgmental about others' behavior or may become cautious and suspicious. Others may have thoughts about suicide or become involved with substance abuse or criminal activities. Some may try to relieve the pain and gain control by trying to behave like an adult or may regress to an earlier developmental stage. Do not be afraid to seek professional support.

Remember

- > You are encouraged to seek professional help and guidance. Your CTSS support worker can help you find as appropriate professional.

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