

**Please note: the following information is intended for families seeking guidance on how to navigate questions / conversations from children & teens with appropriate developmental understanding of traumatic events. This article is not appropriate to discuss with every child. Please consider your child's developmental stage of understanding and managing traumatic events and grief before using this language to discuss with your child. If you are unsure, please contact school counselors.

Supporting Children & Teens after a Traumatic Death

(adapted from [Dougy.org](https://www.dougy.org))

Have simple, open discussions

Tell the truth *How do I tell my child or teen?* It's a question we hear a lot. Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in language children can understand. Let their questions guide what else to share. You do not have to describe in detail what happened (unless they ask, and then you should answer honestly). You might say, "Mommy died. She was stabbed and she died." Avoid euphemisms such as *passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost*, as they can confuse children.

Even though these discussions can be hard to have, being honest and open is an important first step in helping grieving children. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation, and also keeps children from using their limited energy and inner resources to figure out what happened.

Children who are not told the truth often fill in the blanks themselves, sometimes with a story that is worse than what actually happened. They may worry they did something wrong or somehow caused the death. Reassure them this is not the case. With the public nature of many violent deaths, it's important for children to know the information that is available to the larger community. This will prevent them from hearing something for the first time at school or elsewhere.

Be prepared for repetition

Don't be surprised if children ask the same questions over and over. The news can be very disturbing to children and they can only take in small bits of information at a time. This doesn't mean you did a bad job explaining. Children are just trying to make sense of what happened. You can help by repeating the same simple and honest explanation you gave about the death. It can be painful

to have to repeat the story, but know that by doing so, you are helping children understand.

Death of Violent Nature

Children grieving a violent death may experience nightmares and day terrors recreating the scene, fear for their and others safety, and intense feelings of anger, revenge, or isolation. Even if they did not witness the violent death, children often imagine what the scene looked like. In either case it can be helpful to connect the child with a qualified and supportive person, such as a counselor or therapist to talk with about their experiences. Play, art, and big energy activities allow them to process their experiences non-verbally because they often do not have words to describe the event.

Media Attention

Because of the public nature of crime/violent death, the media is usually very present and can be invasive in the family's life. News reports in newspapers, on TV or the internet are numerous. While it is helpful to limit children's exposure to news stories, it's also important to not withhold information about what happened.

Community Reaction

There is still a large stigma surrounding violent death. Families often encounter negative judgment and assumptions about the details of the death. This automatic association can be extremely isolating and painful for children. Some children will blame themselves for the death, thinking they could have done something to keep the person who died safe. Many children don't want to talk about what happened because they worry that others will tease them or say hurtful things about the person or their family. It is helpful to roleplay with the child what they can say when asked about the person's death. You can give them permission not to share anything if they don't want to tell others.

Emotional reactions

Children experience many different emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, powerlessness, loneliness, revenge, relief, and even joy. Sometimes children don't have any visible reaction at all. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong feelings in grief, just individual reactions.

You can support children and teens by listening to and acknowledging their emotions. With powerful feelings like anger, revenge, and fear, consider finding ways children can show their feelings without injuring themselves or anyone else. Tossing pillows, building and knocking down blocks, throwing nerf balls, scribbling with crayons, and running outside are a few examples of safe physical outlets. You can also remind children that while it's okay to have big feelings, "You are really, really angry right now, and that's okay," it's not okay to hurt anyone or anything, "You can be really angry, but you can't kick me or throw your toys at the dog."

Create space for play

Children often use play, rather than talking, as a way to express themselves. Children grieving a violent death might create play situations that explore violent themes, like dinosaurs killing other dinosaurs, army people shooting the enemy, or crashing trucks into walls. Their play is a way of trying to make sense of what has happened. Playing with dolls and puppets allows children to tell violent stories they can't share in other ways. Art materials provide a way to put feelings onto paper, so get out the crayons, paper, markers, paint, clay, and other supplies.

You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of photos, or drawing a picture, but be open to their ideas and suggestions for projects. Journaling is another way for children to get their story out.

Some children will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression. After a violent death, children often experience chaotic energy, so be sure to create time and space for big energy play (like running or jumping,) that offers a safe outlet for strong emotions.

Remember the person who died

The stigma of violent death can keep people from talking about the person and sharing memories. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life: "Your friend really liked this song," or "Your friend was the best painter I know." Children often appreciate pictures and possessions of the person who died. With photos, consider making copies to give to young children so that they can carry them around without the fear of tearing or damaging the originals. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures a child might like, ask which ones are important to them. You may want to remember or mark significant days such as the birthday of the person who died, or the anniversary of their death by going to the grave or special place, making the person's favorite meal, or lighting a candle and sharing a memory.

Provide structure and routine

Life is often in upheaval after a violent death, so finding ways to establish predictability is helpful. For example, you might create routines around breakfast, school, and bedtime. Children may also need some flexibility: This way they know what to expect (*bedtime is at 7:30 p.m.*) but can also trust that if they need something else (*tonight we can read an extra story*) their world will be responsive. Work with the child to provide a safe home environment.

Offer choices

Children appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. When someone dies in a violent way, children can feel powerless and out of control.

Giving children choices can help them regain a sense of power and trust they can have a say in their lives. Provide choices that are in line with their developmental level, for example: *Would you like cereal or toast for breakfast? Which stuffed animal would you like to sleep with? Who would you like to sit with at the memorial service?*

These are just a few tips for how to support children and teens grieving a violent death. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.