

Talking to Children about Traumatic Events

Talking to a child about death can be a difficult topic. Talking with children about murder and suicide can be one of the harder conversations a parent may have with their child. It is normal to feel uncomfortable. Everyone feels unprepared, uneasy, and anxious telling children about such sad, painful, and inconceivable events. As loving people, we want to protect our children from pain and confusion. As a parent, we often do not have the option to avoid talking about an event that will directly or indirectly impact them. This is another opportunity for your child to experience you as a source of guidance, support, and stability in their life.

Children will often need to have multiple conversations about such difficult and overwhelming material. Therefore, it is more important to cultivate a proper attitude and approach to these topics rather than figuring out just the “right” thing to say. The following are some guidelines to help you think about what you might want to incorporate into your discussions. By no means does this cover everything and it should be used to inform your values and goals rather than replace them.

Some Basic Needs Children Have

They want to know that their feelings are okay no matter what they are.

They want to feel loved and valued above all else.

They want to feel protected and reassured that no one else is leaving them or will die right now.

They want to know that nothing they do, say, or think can make this type of event happen.

They want to know that their routines and plans will be consistent and predictable (i.e. sports practice, going to school, bed time routines, ect.).

“I know I have to tell them that these people have died, but should I tell them the truth, that a father committed murder and suicide?”

Obviously, this is a difficult question and a very personal choice about how much to share with your child. Clearly, a child’s age should always be taken into consideration before deciding on what is appropriate to share.

In an attempt to shield our children from the harsh truth of a situation we may over look the fact that children often see and hear information from many other sources. These events have clearly been in the media, and possibly a topic of conversation for neighbors, relatives, and other children who come in contact with your child. It is often better to have your child hear this information from you directly. You are then better able to control and provide accurate information.

Children can often perceive these events in a much scarier way than the truth itself. However, providing too much graphic detail can also be unhelpful. Ideally we want to strike a balance between honesty and thoughtful restraint. This can be a difficult task and is often helped by talking this over with someone else. It may be helpful in your decision making to think about the following; what does your child already know, whom they will come in contact with, what may they learn from others over the coming days and weeks, what type personality do they have? I believe that with

some effort and support the truth can be discussed in a way that is open and honest, as well as protective and supportive.

As you provide a model of openness and willingness to speak to your child about difficult topics they will learn to be open and honest with you. In addition, they are more prepared to handle conversations when others talk about these events. This leads to developing a more trusting relationship and open channel of communication with your child.

“How should I approach this conversation?”

One of the first things to do is make sure YOU feel supported. By asking for help from family members, friends, clergy or mental health professionals you will be in a much better frame of mind to have this type of conversation. The second thing to keep in mind is to follow your child’s lead. This is more about creating a long-term open relationship than accomplishing a task. Keep in mind that children cannot process as much information as adults. This is especially true for young children who may be experiencing intense emotions during these conversations. By taking frequent breaks to check in with your child to see if they have question and understand what they are being told you can pace the conversation in a manageable way.

Give children opportunities to ask questions. Ask them what they would like to do after talking together. They may want to talk more, stay close to a relative, play, or get some emotional distance from the events. Follow the child’s lead. Observe their body language. Remember that everyone grieves differently and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. There are no right or wrong feelings to have. All feelings or reactions are normal *for them*. Some children need to be involved and want a lot of information; other children may not want to be involved and want very little information.

It is okay to ask them if they would like to talk about it more. Whenever possible, it is always best to be a good listener and let them talk and ask questions. Do your best to be available to talk about what happened, and let them choose their own ways of coping and expressing grief.

It also is okay to not know what to say or do. Be honest with children and say, “*I don’t know.*” Let them know that although you may not have answers to all of their questions right now, you will do your best to learn. To some questions there are no clear answers. At these times, it may be helpful to search your own values and beliefs to help guide your discussion.

It is very important to draw attention to the person’s life *before* the death. While their death was tragic, it is *not* who the person was to the child while they were alive. Talk about memories and what that person meant while they were alive, because this is what will be left for the child to remember in the years to come.

“What can I do for my children over time, after we have initially talked about what has happened?”

You have already begun to help your child for the future by initiating an open relationship with him or her right now. You also can encourage children to express their feelings through art, drawing, books, writing, and playing (depending on their age and interests). It is common for children to retell what happened, or they may draw or play in ways that reenact traumatic events. This is often useful

for children for expressing themselves and creating an opportunity for others to talk with them about their feelings.

Look for opportunities for your child to talk with other people going through similar experiences. By helping your child and your family connect to others you can avoid common feelings of isolation that occur when traumatic events happen. Knowing that they (and you) are not alone can be one of the most healing gifts you can give your child, yourself, and others in the community.

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