

Reasons to Talk About Death

At [Judi's House/JAG Institute](#), we know it can be difficult to talk about death with children. You might find yourself saying, "I am protecting them", "They are too young, and will not understand", and perhaps asking "Why do they need to know that?".

Developmentally, children are studying the world around them and have a natural tendency to be curious. An NPR columnist [suggests](#) that the truth "is vital for their understanding of the world, their confidence and the development of their morals and values." When beginning to process grief, Anne Berenberg, PhD and Vicki Scalzitti [write about the importance of truth](#) in having a conversation about death as the "solid ground" for the child's process.

The information below is a combination of experiences and information gathered from families we have worked with about the importance of talking about death and cause of death with children.

Holding the story

Beginning a conversation with children about the true cause of death can be a way to lessen the load for yourself or other family members that might feel as though they are holding information that might "slip out" to others. Holding the story in this way can create increased distress and worry for family members and further lead to the possibility that the children hear information in a way that is not supportive or helpful. We also hear about many families and children that learn about a death or gain knowledge of a death through social media, news, or other messaging. Having a conversation about the true cause of death prevents the worry about how, when, and where children might find out and gives you control in supporting them in a helpful and empathic way.

Control

Judi's House encourages caregivers and families to have face-to-face conversations when learning about a death so there can be control of how the information is shared.

When you have a conversation with the children yourself, you can control:

- the information that is shared
- how and when the story is told
- how the children are supported in the moment
- the usage of language that is comfortable for your family

These conversations further act as an opportunity to build trust with your children, while modeling healthy expressions of communication and feelings and preventing family secrets.

Creating a narrative

Part of the *Pathfinders* curriculum at Judi's House integrates sharing stories or narratives as a step along the family's grief journey. Children might "fill in the blanks" of their narratives when they do not know or understand the true cause of death. Some children might create their own narrative of the death with details that could be unrelated to the truth and cause more distress.

Judi's House encourages caregivers to share the true cause of death before starting services at Judi's House for the following reasons:

- If children find out later in life about the true cause of death, it could restart the grief process.
- If families and caregivers share more about the death prior to engaging in therapeutic services, children will have a safe and supportive environment to process the death with peers that have had similar experiences and the support of counseling staff.

When talking about difficult subjects with children, you can use developmentally appropriate language that gives them an understanding of the death that does not isolate their experience from other family members. An example of this might be stating that someone who died by suicide had a "sickness in their brain that made them want to stop living." If they ask questions, you can offer basic language that offers comfort to their curiosity while letting them know that it's okay to have an ongoing conversation about their special person with you.

Feelings of fault

It's not unusual that children might express feeling guilty or feeling that they caused the death. Some children might say "I shouldn't have argued with him or he would be alive" or "I should have done what he asked me to, I stressed him out too much". If your child gives any indication that they feel at fault, be clear that they did not cause the death. It can be important to let your child know that their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings do not cause someone to die. By having these conversations now, you can help your child process the thoughts and concerns they're holding onto.

Next steps

In many cases, these conversations can be more difficult for caregivers than they might be for a child. Give yourself permission to make mistakes and find your voice along the way. There are always new opportunities to continue connecting with your child. Beginning the conversation lets them know that you are there to listen and to help them feel loved and supported.

Resources

“Telling Kids the Whole Truth” by Martha Leathe as heard on Weekend Sunday Edition: This I Believe, March 16, 2008

- <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88241635>

“Supporting Children and Teens after a Suicide Death: Talking to a Child about Suicide” by Anne Berenberg Phd; Vicki Scalzitti in *Alliance of Hope for Suicide Loss Survivors*

- <https://allianceofhope.org/find-support/children-teens/supporting-children-and-teens-after-a-suicide-death/talking-to-a-child-about-suicide/?fbclid=IwAR2PdIv7QX3qNwEBkTjuf6Pt3VGNExwEh7h9B-sAk8kdPH7sykNxuyIVRg>

“8 Strategies to be the Parent Teens Will Actually Talk To” by Rosalind Wiseman in *Cultures of Dignity*, December 1, 2016

- https://culturesofdignity.com/8-strategies-to-be-the-parent-teens-will-actually-talk-to/?fbclid=IwAR3Aw3PH3TloE2IDYx0-IW_98EkABjac6OvtV3sZYWg_m4MWnk-eKrt3ylc