

Why Share True Cause of Death with Children?

One way [Judi's House/JAG Institute](#) supports grieving families is by helping caregivers tell their children how someone special died. True cause of death can be a topic that is met with anxiety or uncertainty for some families.

This can include questions about whether their child is “old enough” to understand and concern that telling them could change their perception of the person who died. It's common for worries to arise about not feeling prepared to answer the difficult questions from their children that may accompany this kind of conversation.

Here are some of the reasons why Judi's House/JAG Institute encourages caregivers to share true cause of death with the children in their care:

Truth telling is key

Sometimes, we will learn children have a good understanding of how their special person died, even when their caregiver has yet to tell them. They may have overheard phone conversations, found out through social media, the news, or another family member. If this is the case, children can feel that the information is secretive and may not be as open to discussing what they have learned with their caregiver.

Constructing their own truths

Even if children do not know the true cause of death, it may still be on their minds. It makes sense that our brains naturally want to know information we do not have to make sense of complicated things, such as a death loss. Judi's House has seen children “fill in the blanks” about how someone died with graphic scenes or intrusive images that may be more harmful than the truth. When the cause of death is discussed openly and honestly, in an age-appropriate manner, that understanding can build a foundation for a safe and supportive environment to process their grief with peers, counselors and volunteers.

Building trust

As mentioned previously, there can be many opportunities for children to find out about the cause of death unintentionally. Even if told by a caregiver when they are older, withholding this information can result in a child feeling that they are not worthy of knowing it. It may lead to broken trust between a caregiver and the child or cause a child to hide feelings and minimize communication with a caregiver.

Taking control

At Judi's House/JAG Institute, we encourage caregivers to have face-to-face conversations with their children when sharing information about a death loss. When a caregiver chooses to share the true cause of death with their children, they are also choosing how to do so. A caregiver can be in control of telling the child in a safe space and way that is developmentally appropriate for them and remain open for questions or concerns to be voiced. This can feel far more supportive and comforting to a child than finding out at school or unintentionally. Having these conversations also models healthy emotional expression and discourages secret telling at the same time.

Finding out later can be messy

Grief is made up of all the thoughts, feelings, body reactions, and behaviors that happen after someone special dies. If a child believes one thing about the cause of death and does important work around all their grief reactions related to that, learning something different about how their special person died can be confusing. They may find that new knowledge to be accompanied by new (or even previously worked through) hurtful thoughts, feelings, body reactions and behaviors.

Sharing the burden

If a caregiver chooses not to share the true cause of death, it then leads to them holding the story on their own. Holding a story is an extra weight to keep to yourself and it takes a lot of energy to keep a secret. It can be especially burdensome to only tell certain family members, which then reinforces the keeping of family secrets.

By bringing up the topic, caregivers model that it is okay to talk about how a special person died. Often, Judi's House/JAG Institute has found that children who have learned the true cause of death appear more empowered in their grief experience and the sharing of their story during group therapy.