

# HEARTLINKS GRIEF CENTER

## HOW DO I TELL THE KIDS?

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"There was a terrible accident. A disease became terminal. Drugs were taken. A heart stopped working. A gun was shot. Cars became entangled. A house burned. Someone special died."

Your heart is broken, and you know that theirs will be too. How can you tell your children that someone they love, someone they thought would always be here, has died? We don't have all the answers, nor can we fix it. But there are ways to make this easier on you and on the children.

- Do it sooner, rather than later.
  - Take some time to gather your thoughts. Have a plan for what message you want to give the kids.
  - Have a good cry first. It's okay to give yourself some time to process the news.
  - If kids are sleeping or playing, it's okay to wait for them to wake up or when they are finished playing. As long as there is no danger of them discovering the death before you can tell them, it's okay to wait a short time.
- Be honest. They trust you, you need to honor that trust during this scary time by telling the kids what happened.
  - While kids do not need gory details, they do need the truth.
  - If you don't tell them, someone else will. Or they will find out on the internet or Facebook.
- Keep it simple. Tell them as plainly as you can, with only the details you think they can handle based on their age and developmental level.
  - Listen to questions and make sure you understand what the child is asking.
  - For young children, it is often helpful to discuss all the concrete aspects of death (deceased, cannot breathe, sleep, walk, talk or eat).
- Tell them what happens now. Explain funeral or memorial rituals that will help you say goodbye to your special person.
  - Enlist the help of the funeral director or clergy
  - Talk about how involved they want to be. This is probably the only opportunity they will get to say goodbye, so encourage, but don't force participation.
- Questions may come again and again. As children grieve, they may ask the same questions repeatedly as they try to make sense of what happened. Be patient and answer as best you can - this is not a reflection of your answers, but of how children learn.

- Physical touch. It can be easier to both say and hear about a loved one's death if you are touching each other - for any child who will let you, this is an ideal time for a rocking chair. But a hug, or even holding hands, can provide comfort to you both during this time, so don't be afraid to reach out.

#### Sample starters:

- You know we all love Grandpa very much. You know Grandpa has been very sick. He's been sicker than you or I have ever been. It seems that his body got very sick and very tired and stopped working this morning. Grandpa was so sick, the doctors couldn't help him anymore. I am very sad; Grandpa died this morning.
- Your brother was on his way home from school this afternoon. There was a car accident. A deer came out of the woods in front of his car. I am so sad; your brother died.
- I know you and Jaime have been friends for a long time. I don't know how it happened, but she was shot last night. They took her to the hospital, but she died in surgery. I am so sad for you right now.
- Your mom has been very sad lately. Something in her brain hasn't been working the way it's supposed to. She's been saying and doing things that aren't like her at all. I love your mom very much, but she died today. I am very sad. She took some drugs and they made her heart stop working. Your mom is a good person.
- Special note about suicide deaths: When someone we love dies by suicide, there are special issues that must be addressed. The most common question is "Why?" and it is the most difficult (if not impossible) to answer.
  - "Brain attacks" are the best explanation that we have found to explain suicide. A "brain attack" is similar to a heart attack, in that both results in the body not working the way it is supposed to work.
    - In a "brain attack", something chemically changes in the brain that allows the otherwise unthinkable act of suicide to become an option.
    - During this window of time, opportunity presents itself and the person kills him/herself before the chemicals can adjust to a level that once again supports self-preservation.
  - There is still a very real stigma associated with death by suicide that may make people feel less understood and judged about their loss. Finding support is vital to help people process their loss.

For more information, please call Heartlinks at 618-277-1800.