



HOW TO TELL THE CHILDREN NOTIFYING CHILDREN OF A DEATH

for 24/7 support following a death in the military community, call 800.959.TAPS (8277).

Through the years, we have learned a great deal from many grieving children and their families about safe language when notifying children of a death. Below are some general concepts we suggest using when talking with children about death, dying, grief, and mourning. As you set the tone to begin these conversations, each family will have individual needs. We encourage you to follow your child(ren)'s lead as they explore their own thoughts and feelings surrounding their loss. TAPS is here at 800.959.TAPS (8277) to help guide you as you share this information with your children.

It is important to talk to your child(ren) as soon as possible after the death. The goal is to help stabilize issues around the death, minimize unnecessary trauma, and create emotional safety for children to process their loss.

You may feel unable to concentrate; want to protect your child(ren) from pain; and/or be at a loss for words to express what happened.

REACH OUT TO YOUR TRUSTED NETWORK AND GET THE SUPPORT YOU NEED TO HAVE THESE CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR CHILD(REN).

You may wish to have someone you trust be present with you when you share the news. It can be helpful to have another adult to be a caring presence for the children and create a strong support system.

You may wish to deliver the news separately to older versus younger children.

If you do tell the children separately, make sure to tell them in close time proximity, so it doesn't become a sibling issue with one sibling knowing earlier/first.

If you exercise a particular faith, you may benefit from speaking to your faith leaders for comfort or spiritual messaging to incorporate in discussion with your child(ren).

Discuss the death using language that is conducive and sensitive to your faith, religion, or spiritual beliefs. Your military chaplains are available to support you.

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO BUILD A FOUNDATION OF CLEAR AND DIRECT COMMUNICATION BASED ON TRUST AND HONESTY AS YOU AND YOUR CHILD(REN) NAVIGATE THE LOSS.

There may be people who give unsolicited advice. Be prepared for resistance, unsolicited, or perhaps unhelpful advice or guidance from others who may be well intended, but are not experienced with these types of situations.

Others may advise you to wait to tell your children, or they may even suggest that you change, omit, or lie about the details.

Consider this response: "I could really use your support, I believe I am doing what is best for my child(ren)."

It's never too late to share the truth with your children. There may be instances where you need to revisit this conversation or perhaps share more information as children grow or ask more questions.

Consider this response: "Since we last talked, I have learned..." or "It is important that you know the truth now." or "When we first talked about (this or what happened), I was not sure what to say, but now I realize how important it is to talk about this honestly."

It is important to be clear with your communication. Keep in mind that children may take what you say literally. Avoid using euphemisms such as "Daddy flew away," "We lost him/her." or "They fell asleep." These euphemisms can cause confusion.

KNOW THAT CHILDREN MAY:

Be aware of emotions around them; respond to body language; overhear conversations; ask questions directly or indirectly; be curious; and need information to understand what has happened.

Keep it simple, using words children can understand based on their age or developmental level. Refrain from sharing graphic or unnecessary details. Some circumstances of death may have multiple or complex factors that make it difficult even for adults to understand. It is okay to share with children that you also don't understand yet.

Consider following the child's lead, starting with what they do know and then answering questions they may have. Offer brief details so they can process one step at a time.

ACCIDENT LOSS

Younger Children: *“A sad thing happened with a (car, motorcycle, etc.). (insert name)’s body was hurt, could not be fixed, and he/she died.”*

Older Children: *“(insert name) was in a (car, motorcycle, training) accident and died.”*

SUDDEN LOSS

Younger Children: *“(insert name)’s (heart, brain, etc.) stopped working. It couldn’t be fixed and they died.”*

Older Children: *“(insert name)’s (heart, brain, etc.) had a (heart attack, aneurysm, etc.). It couldn’t be fixed and they died.”*

ILLNESS LOSS

Younger Children: *“(insert name)’s body couldn’t fight the sickness anymore and they died.”*

Older Children: *“Because their illness couldn’t be healed, (insert name)’s body wore out and stopped working.”*

SUICIDE OR SUICIDE-SUSPECTED LOSS

Younger Children: *“He made his body stop working and has died.”*

Older Children: *“She died by suicide.” or “He ended his life.” or “Suicide means that a person caused their own death.”*

Children will often ask, “Why?” It is okay to say “We don’t know why.”; this is a subject you can talk more about in time as information becomes available.

OVERDOSE LOSS

Younger Children: *“We don’t think (insert name) meant for it to happen, but they died from taking too many drugs.” or “What happened may have been an accident and we are still working to understand more.”*

Older Children: *“(insert name) died due to complications from addiction. They had a Substance Use Disorder, a disease where someone uses an unsafe amount of (alcohol, medicine, or drugs) that can end in death.”*

VIOLENT LOSS

(homicide, murder, civil unrest, mass violence resulting in casualties, domestic violence)

Younger Children: *“Sometimes things happen that are hard to understand.”*

Older Children: *“Senseless violence is hard to understand - even for adults.”*

COMBAT OR HOSTILE ACTION LOSS

Younger Children: *“(insert name) was hurt while in ___ and he/she has died.”*

Older Children: *“(insert name) has died while serving in___.”*

AMBIGUOUS OR UNDETERMINED LOSS

Younger Children: *We are still trying to learn what happened, but (insert name) has died.”*

Older Children: *“There are things we may never know, but we are still trying to learn what happened that caused (insert name)’s death.”*

MISSING IN ACTION OR UNRECOVERED

Younger Children: *“We are waiting for more information to learn what has happened, and there are some things we don’t know yet, but (insert name) has gone missing and they have not been able to find him/her”*

Older Children: *“There are some things we may never understand, and we are still trying to learn what happened, but (insert name) has gone missing and they are not able to locate him/her.”*

Remind children that it is okay to feel what they are feeling (i.e. sad, mad, confused, etc.). Help them understand why you or others might feel some of these ways - because your loved one died and not because of something they (the child) did or did not do.

“This is hard. We are going to get through this together.”

Reassure and nurture child(ren) so they know that they are safe, and that you (and other family members) are doing everything possible to stay safe.

You may see a variety of reactions in child(ren) after receiving the news. Some children may become very emotional, others may show no or little emotion, and some may even want to play or socialize. These are all normal reactions.

Children tend to move in and out of grief as they cannot stay with the intensity of grief for long periods of time.

It is healthy for parents and caregivers to show or share emotions with their child(ren), but be mindful not to impose your grief or anger on your child(ren).

It is equally important for adults to seek and receive grief support from other adults and attend to one’s own well-being to be a stable presence for children.

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

★ TAPS Youth Programs, TAPS.org/YouthPrograms ★ TAPS Suicide Loss Support, TAPS.org/Suicide ★ National Alliance for Children’s Grief (NACG), ChildrenGrieve.org ★ Schaefer, D. & Lyons, C. (2011). How do we tell the children? A step-by-step guide for helping children to teens cope when someone dies. ★ Schonfeld, D. (2021, April 15). Supporting students coping with grief and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Webinar presentation]. American School Counselor Association. ★ New York Life Foundation: Death and Loss: Helping Children Manage Their Grief ★ GriefSpeaks.com ★ OurHouse-Grief.org ★ The Dougy Center, Dougy.org

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

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