



When a Tragedy Occurs in a Community

Guidelines for Caregivers to Help a Child

1. Give your child the facts in a simple, straightforward manner. Don't go into too much detail with younger children, they will ask more questions as they come to mind. If you don't have answers to certain questions, it's okay to say "I don't know the answer to that question, but I will try to find out"
2. Use direct, concrete language. Say the words that apply: "accident", "dead", "critical condition", "survivor" or "victim".
3. Ask questions, "What are you feeling?" "What have you heard from your friends?", "What do you know about what happened?" This gives you as a parent a chance to determine that your child has accurate facts and not some scenario that came out of rumors, which can and do travel quickly among children in any community. Repeat this process, making sure they have accurate information and ask directly if there are any new words or information that need further explanation.
4. Share some of your feelings about the event with your child. Identify and talk about these feelings. You are their role model. Sharing your feelings of sadness, grief, sympathy and concern for the family and community affected by the event. Your sharing openly empowers your child to express their feelings more comfortably, and helps them to learn empathy and concern for others
5. Keep in mind the age and level of comprehension of your child and speak to that level. You don't want to overwhelm them with too much information and / or feelings that might be problematic for them. End each conversation about the event with a "positive" statement such as how safe you feel because of... (Whatever safety measures are in place in and around your home, in your lives and your community) end with a nurturing hug and supportive, encouraging words.
6. If your child is whiny, clinging to you more, exhibiting regressive behaviors or experiencing sleep disturbances he or she may be fearful about something happening to you or someone in the family. They may not be able to put words to these fears and may not even be conscious of these fears. If your child is feeling insecure and frightened, they will need a great deal of reassurance from you, a lot of touching and contact with you. Over time this will help your child to relax and feel less fearful.
7. Don't hesitate to refer to the deceased by name. The person may be dead, but he or she is a person to be remembered, not spoken about in hushed pronouns.
8. Talk about the funeral and/or memorial service. Describe in detail what happens there and give your child a choice about whether or not they want to attend. Think and talk about other ways they can say "goodbye" if they want to and if their relationship with the deceased calls for that. This might also may include ways of expressing feelings and "sympathies" to the family, perhaps, by presenting flowers or writing a note.

9. Depending upon your religious views and your child's age and questions you may want to talk about your belief about what happens when someone dies. Be careful not to say things like, "It was God's will", etc. Statements like this raise more concerns and questions than they answer.

10. Remind your child that you are available to talk about any questions or concerns they may have. Don't, however, always wait for them to raise the subject. Avoid discussions at bedtime.

11. If they have "bad dreams" provide opportunities to talk about them, as this is a way to discharge stress.

12. You may want to read a book that discusses death to your child

13. Friends, family, neighbors, schoolmates often find solace and comfort in doing something to honor the person who died; for example, providing a memorial or advocating for a related cause.

14. Sudden, violent death, or death of a young person is especially hard to grieve, and disruption of sleep, appetite and daily activities are normal responses.

15. Some symptoms of ongoing internal stress include:

- Withdrawal from friends and/or school activities
- Little or total lack of emotion regarding the loss or event
- Prolonged inability to acknowledge that the event has happened
- Extreme reactions to the grief and/or fear that lasts a long time
- Changes in health
- Prolonged sadness
- Extreme changes in behavior

16. If you find that your child is developing problems that you don't know how to handle, don't hesitate to seek professional help.

17. Remember, grief is a natural, normal response to death.

18. As a caregiver and role model, ask yourself how you can turn this tragedy into a learning experience that will empower you, your family, and your child.

Partially Adapted from Helen Fitzgerald