

Telling a child a friend has died



When a child's friend or classmate dies it can feel different to other experiences of death and dying, particularly if the death was sudden or unexpected.

As well as their own response, your child may well have to share in the reactions of others as part of a communal grief experienced by the community of which they were both a part. This could be a school community, a neighbourhood, a youth group and if your child and their friend were part of several clubs together, then each of these 'communities' are likely to be grieving.

If your child's friend has been ill for some time, it may be the community has already found some ways of coming together and expressing their emotions. However, grief is unique to each person and their circumstances and whilst the death of a friend can result in the potential for great support in the wider community, there can also be a risk of relational difficulties and disharmony as a number of children try to adjust to the loss and manage strong emotions alongside each other.

In the case of a sudden death, the shock to both individuals and the community can make this even more difficult.

As a parent or carer, you may be less in control of how and when your child finds out about the death, and you may even find out after they do. Whilst many schools find ways of managing these situations, news spreads fast in communities and often social media is used before a school or community group has been informed officially.

It can also be the case that misinformation travels fast within communities or via social media and as a parent or carer it can sometimes be hard to verify the accuracy of what your child is being told.

What can help your child?

If you are responsible for telling your child about the death of their friend it is better to do that as soon as possible, choosing a quiet time, not too close to bedtime.

Start by telling your child you have some very sad news to tell them, and use simple, clear language. Stick to the facts as you know them and avoid speculation. Reassure your child that they will learn more as time goes on but until then there may be some 'not knowing'.

It is natural for everyone to think about the circumstances around the death and want to piece together the details of what happened, but it can increase fear and anxiety in children to hear lots of speculation.

It is likely that your child's world has felt relatively safe and secure up until this point and becoming aware of too many potential risks and dangers all at once can feel overwhelming. Encourage your child not to post or share the news via social media in the first few days to allow others to find out 'safely'.

Children react in a variety of ways when told news such as this, including deep distress or no obvious reaction at all. This does not mean they are not affected or don't have feelings; it can take time to process the news.

Following any death, it is not unusual for children to worry about their own safety and the wellbeing of those around them more than they did before, but this can be particularly acute after the death of a friend.

Let your child know that they can talk to you about how they are feeling and that you will do your best to answer any questions they have. Offer your child plenty of hugs and reassurance and use practical strategies to help manage any fears, for example by being clear about who is picking them up or what time you will be back. Avoid too much emphasis on absolute promises about your own / their safety and security but do refer to things that are factual, for example "events like this do happen, but they are very rare".

As far as possible keep to normal routines and expectations of behaviour as this will help your child feel safe and also avoid the need for them to think too much about their day-to-day routine. However, it may be that they don't feel up to social engagements and the usual clubs or activities they take part in.

Support your child to express their emotions in healthy ways through talking, creative means and exercise, as appropriate to them. Create low-pressure opportunities for your child to chat to you away from other siblings, for example in the car or on a dog walk. Alternatively, there may be another adult in your child's life that can support you both in this way.

In grief, children often look for ways to continue a bond with a loved one who has died. This may become a focus for the community over time, but this connection can also be something you can help your child to find. This might be as simple as creating a memory box, making a scrap book of photos, or something more substantial such as organizing a memorial, planting a tree or holding a fundraising event. There is no 'right' way to foster this bond, what is important is that, however this connection is expressed, it is meaningful to your child.

Grief is a natural response to loss and over time it is likely your child will find ways to manage their grief, alongside re-engaging with normal life. However, if you have concerns about your child, particularly if they are facing other challenges in life, then you may decide to seek help via your child's school, GP or other means. At Treetops we are always happy to talk to you about the specialist support we can offer.

Further support

This leaflet is written to support our two primary publications in the Little Gem series:

- Supporting a child when someone they love has died / Someone I love has died
- Someone significant has died – handling grief as a young person

Our other specialist leaflets include:

- Funerals and cremations
- Supporting a child bereaved by murder
- Supporting a child bereaved by suicide
- Talking about and understanding death
- Building resilience following a bereavement
- Viewing a body with a child

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