



## **How to Talk to a Child When Someone They Love Has Died From Homicide**

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Talking to a child about the murder of someone they love is one of the hardest things you may ever do. It is normal to feel uncomfortable. Everyone feels unprepared, uneasy, and anxious telling a child that someone they love has died from homicide. As loving people, we want to protect children from pain. Unfortunately, we cannot avoid talking about an event that will impact their life. As adults, we can be supportive in helping children to experience life naturally, and lead them in positive directions.

### **I know I have to tell them that this person died, but should I tell them the truth, that the person was murdered?**

Some adults are hesitant to tell children that someone has died from homicide because they want to protect children from painful feelings. This is a very understandable concern, because of the fear and attention that may come from experiencing the loss of someone who was murdered. It is, of course, always a personal choice to give other reasons for the cause of death. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that when adults hide the truth in an effort to protect children, the children often see and hear information from other sources, such as a clipping from the newspaper, or an overheard conversation, from a neighbor, a relative, or another child who lets the “cat out of the bag”. One way to have better control over information is to tell children the truth yourself.

Remember that what a child perceives may actually be scarier for them than the truth itself. On the other hand, it is *not* a good idea to describe graphic or disturbing details that the child is unaware of. But, the truth can be talked about in ways that are open and honest, as well as protective. Children will follow your lead. If you are open and honest with them, you are teaching them that they can be the same with you. As a result, they will be prepared when others talk about what happened, and you and your child will develop a more trusting relationship.

### **What do I say? How do I talk about it?**

This will depend on the child’s age. Find a private, comfortable place. Use words that are understandable for their age. If possible, ask for help from a supportive family member, friend, or grief counselor beforehand for advice. Consider what the child may already know or may have experienced (for example, if they witnessed the murder or saw the police in their home). Consider what they may hear in the news or from others around them. Understanding children’s personal experiences can guide you in helping them open up about what happened and what they know.

Give children opportunities to ask questions. Ask them what they would like to do after talking together. They may want to talk more, stay close to a relative, play, or get some emotional distance from the events. Follow the child’s lead. Observe their body language. Remember that everyone grieves differently and there are no right or wrong feelings or ways to grieve. All feelings or reactions are normal *for them*. Some children need to be involved and want a lot of information; other children may not want to be involved and want less information.

It is ok to ask them if they would like to talk about it more. Whenever possible, it is always best to be a good listener, have a calm non-judgmental attitude, and allow children to talk and ask questions. Do your best to be available to talk about what happened, and let them choose their *own* way of coping and grieving. Assisting your child in expressing their feelings honestly will allow you to offer comfort and acceptance for their feelings (no matter what they are).

It is also okay to not know what to say or do. Be honest with children and say “*I don’t know.*” Let them know that although you may not have answers to all of their questions right now, you will do your best to learn.

It also is very important to draw attention to the person’s life *before* the death. Homicide is the cause of death, but it is not who that person was. It is important for your child to remember that person for who they were, when they were alive. Talk about memories and what that person meant for the child, because this is the lifetime memory that will be left for the child in the years to come.

### **What do I say when a child asks “why” or “how” someone was murdered?**

You could respond in any way that feels the most comforting and open for you and your child. Depending on the circumstances and what the child already knows, you may have to tell a child that “*we may never know why or who murdered the person.*” Consider what information the child has been or will be exposed to. Unfortunately, the news media sometimes reports events in ways that may feel invasive and upsetting for the surviving family. Going into graphic detail about events that the child does not know may be upsetting. It is important to allow the child to talk about the events at their own comfort level. Sometimes a child wants to avoid talking about the details, and sometimes they want to talk about many of the details. Allow them to speak about what happened in their own way and at their own pace. It is also very important to take measures and reassure the child that they and other family members are *physically* safe. Let them know that you will make sure that everything possible will be done to protect them and others they love.

### **“What happened really frightens me. My child has a hard time sleeping at night. How do I help us feel better?”**

For many people, fear is a strong feeling and reaction after experiencing homicide in the family. It is normal to feel frightened or worried that something bad might happen again. Talk to your child about what you both can do to help each other feel safe. Take any extra necessary and precautionary measures to ensure your family’s safety. For example, you may need to have extra or new locks put on the doors. You may want to have a routine and ritual door and window check, if any of these precautions help your child feel better. Extra phone calls and check-ins with your child during the day or night may be necessary for a while until some of their fears go away. Ask for help from others if you think you and your child would feel safer.

There may be times when those strong feelings of fear could resurface again later, perhaps when a trial is coming up, or when other events happen that scare the child. It is not uncommon for the child’s other grief feelings to be put on hold until the child feels safe again. It is very helpful to think of ways to help emotionally sooth and calm yourself and your child. Remember that it is ok and normal to feel afraid, and it is ok to take extra precautions and seek out help to feel safer.

## **What do I tell people who ask what happened? How do I guide a child about how to respond to other people's questions?**

People react to the news of murder in a family in a variety of ways that are sometimes compassionate, or unfortunately, sometimes insensitive. Who you choose to tell and not tell is something that may concern you. Remember that if you choose to *not* tell some people, it is *not* because you should feel ashamed, but rather a reflection of misunderstandings about what it is like to be someone who has had a family member die from homicide.

Let your child know that some people might ask what happened, and they should have a prepared response for those who are not in their close-knit circle. The child should know that others may be judgmental, or say something hurtful, and it may be helpful for them to seek out reassuring comforting people. Ask your child for suggestions and try to come up with some responses together that are the most comforting. This may ease the burden of your child feeling unprepared and put on the spot. Being prepared will help them feel confident that they are not "lying" or attracting more attention to what happened. They are instead making their own choices about what to share about their life.

### **"I can't help but feel like I should have done something to prevent this from happening. I feel partly responsible".**

Your child may feel similarly. People experience a variety of feelings when something traumatic happens, including feeling "responsible". Remember your feelings are normal. No matter what the cause of death, guilt is one of many feelings that most people have. It is natural to feel like we could have prevented something terrible from happening, *no matter how a person dies*. It is important to accept the fact that there are events in life that are out of our control, and we have no control over others who choose to violently hurt someone else. Feeling like we are somewhat responsible for someone's death is normal, but it is not logical. Get support from those who will remind you that you are *not* at fault. And, be sure to give children the same reassurance that what happened is not their fault either.

### **I feel like others will blame the person who died for what happened because they were at the "wrong place" at the "wrong time" and "with the wrong people". But it is not their fault.**

It is absolutely not the victim's fault when others choose to harm them. Unfortunately, people sometimes *"blame the victim"* when bad things happen. When people do this, it creates a false sense of security for them because they themselves feel insecure and scared. That way, they can say "bad things don't happen to me". But, it is *never* the victim's fault when someone else takes action to violently hurt another. Be sure to educate your child if this issue ever comes up.

**“I really feel like I want something terrible to happen to the person who did this. I feel bad for feeling this way because I think I am a good person. I am just so angry.”**

It is normal and natural for many people (adults and children) to have these feelings. You or others may have mixed feelings about thoughts of “revenge”. Remember that many caring compassionate people have these thoughts. Think of some positive actions for you and your child to help direct these emotions in positive and helpful ways. In the future, it might help to find ways to help others who have experienced similar hardships. This can be an excellent outlet for you and your child’s feelings.

**“Is there any good that can come from this?”**

Absolutely. You can become closer as a family or as friends. Your child will look to you for guidance as a role model, and you will be able to model love and support for them. You can have a more open and supportive life with your children. Events like these force us to find ways to take care of each other and ourselves in ways that may not have ever been asked of us before. Be sure to rely on your family’s strengths and positive characteristics. If such a tragic situation can teach us anything, it is that it is important to reach out to each other, protect each other, and share our feelings in safe accepting environments.

**What can I do for my children over time after we have initially talked about what has happened?**

You have already begun to help your child for the future by initiating an open relationship with him or her right now. You can also encourage children to express their feelings through art, drawing, books, writing, and playing (depending on their age and interests). It is common for children to retell what happened to them, or they may draw or play in ways that reenact traumatic events. This is often useful for children for expressing themselves and creating an opportunity for others to talk with them about their feelings.

It is also a good idea to check in with them as time goes by. As they get older, they will probably think differently about the murder of their loved one. Offer to talk about their changing feelings. Professional grief counseling is also available in most communities. Contact a local grief counselor, Hospice, or other bereavement service to help cope with feelings of loss after a death.

Look for opportunities for your child to meet other children or families who have also experienced a traumatic death. Because homicide is a difficult subject for others to talk about, families who experience a murder may feel isolated. Feeling isolated is why it is *especially* important for survivors to feel normal and a part of social groups. Support groups can help reduce the sense of isolation. Knowing that they (and you) are not alone can be one of the most healing gifts you can give your child, yourself, and others in the community. Remember that you can help others when they also know that they are not alone.