Talking with Your Child About Death

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It can be difficult and stressful to talk about death. However, children cope better when their caregivers talk with them about the death in an honest and age-appropriate manner. Here are some tips to guide you:

- Provide your child with physical comfort while talking with them—for example, gently rub their back.

- Don't be afraid to show emotion. If you grieve openly, it gives your child permission to grieve openly. Put words to your emotions and offer reassurance—for example, "I'm crying because I am sad that (___) died. But even though I feel sad, I can still take care of you."

- Provide an honest, short, simple explanation of what happened, using words your child will understand (e.g., "I have something very sad to tell you. (___) was in a very bad car accident. His body was hurt very badly and this made his body stop working and he died." OR "I have something very sad to tell you. (___) died by suicide. This means he made his own body stop working so that he would die."

- Invite dialogue about any questions or worries your child might have: "It's normal to feel confused or worried. What questions or worries do you have about the death?" Answer questions honestly. Usually, when a child asks a question about what happened, they are ready to hear the answer.

- Listen to and validate your child's feelings (e.g., "It is normal to feel angry when someone dies") and invite them to share more: "I know this is very hard. Tell me about your feelings." You can also invite them to draw you a picture of their feelings.

- Your child might ask the same question about the death over and over. This happens because they are trying to make sense of difficult information. Even if you have already answered their question, repeat your response calmly and patiently.

- If your child witnessed any frightening aspect of the death, initiate age-appropriate discussion that validates their feelings—for example, "It was scary when the car crashed and (___) got badly hurt and died."

- Alleviate your child's fear that other family members will die soon too: "Most people live a long and healthy life. If I were to die before you're grown up, there is a plan for you to be taken care of. But I expect to live for a long time."

There is no easy way to tell your child something so difficult. Conversations like these will be upsetting, but afterward you will likely feel relieved that you were honest and able to build a foundation of trust.

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