

When a Friend of Your Child's Dies

A Guide for Parents and Guardians

Step One: Dealing with Your Feelings

When your child's life is touched by the death of a peer or a friend, you may find yourself experiencing a lot of different things at the same time. Initially, you will most likely be stunned. The death of a young person under any circumstances, and especially one that is traumatic, is a rare occurrence that is difficult for most of us to understand. There is an assumption most of us make about life, which is that we are born, grow up and die when we're old. We don't expect children to die before the adults in their lives and when they do, our whole sense of the way in which the world unfolds is thrown into question. We personally confront life's unfairness and are left with the unanswerable question of why bad things happen to good people.

If you knew the deceased personally, you may feel an even greater jumble of unsettling emotions. Give yourself some time to let the news settle. Expect shock to mix with sadness and helplessness for quite some time. You may even find yourself worrying about the safety of your own children. This is a natural if upsetting response and it will usually diminish over time.

The point is that it is really critical for you to take time to deal with your own feelings before you approach your child. As you probably have observed, children are good at picking up on unexpressed emotions. Understanding how you are feeling before you have a conversation with your children is the same technique you're probably using when it comes to addressing other difficult topics - this is no different. Remember the directives from air travel about the use of oxygen masks: you must put on your own mask before you help anyone else with theirs.

Step Two: Helping Your Kids

As you probably know, grief in childhood looks different than it does in adulthood. It may take children some time to express a reaction and when they do, they may experience intense feelings in short bursts that normally tend to pass. They may quickly return to normal activities and it may seem as if the loss isn't very important to them. Remember that sometimes a small dose of a powerful feeling is all a child can stand and they'll return to their feelings about the death in their own time and place. If your child or children had a personal relationship with the deceased through friendship or involvement in team sports, faith-based groups, or community activities, their grief may be more intense. That's why it's important to seize those "teachable moments" when the door to conversation about the death may be open. Here are steps to follow for that conversation:

- Start by expressing your own sadness and confusion about what has happened to their peer. Explain that you've heard a lot of rumors about what went on and you want to understand what your child has heard. Beginning with this information will help you put your child's feelings into context. It will also give you a chance to point out that people often create rumors and gossip in the absence of facts.
- Reiterate your feelings then ask your child to share their feelings. By sharing your feelings first you are demonstrating that feelings, even upsetting ones, are okay to talk about.
- Validate whatever you hear. ("I can appreciate your sadness/confusion/anger/lack of understanding.")
- Be prepared for the classic "I don't know" response and validate that, too! ("I understand that when something like this happens, it can be hard to know how you feel.") Leave the door open to talk about this again in the future.
- If the circumstances of the death were traumatic, be sure to talk about how scary life can be at times and explain that's why it's so important to take as much care as we can to try to stay safe. It's honest to say that sometimes bad things and accidents do happen in life but they aren't very frequent which is why we can get so worried when they happen. It's important to try to learn lessons from them to help us feel safer in our lives.
- A small dose of this conversation is usually enough in this first discussion. Revisit the idea of personal safety again, especially if the circumstances of the death continue to be a topic in the community. Just remember to always include the piece about focusing on personal safety.

This leads into the final part of the conversation: a discussion about help-seeking. Emphasize that nothing in life is ever so terrible or devastating that your child has to manage their feelings and reactions by themselves.

Finally, ask your child who else they would turn for help with their reactions to this death. Depending on your child's age, they may mention another adult or their allegiance may have shifted to peers. Agree that friends are a great resource, but remind your child that when feelings seem overwhelming, it's essential to get help from an adult, too.