

Talking to Children About Loss or Crisis

It is estimated that 1 in 12 children in Florida will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18. This number more than doubles with those who will be bereaved by age 25.

Parents and caregivers often need support themselves when caring for children after a loss. In responding to a loss or crisis, whether it's a death, natural disaster, violence, or trauma children and their families can benefit from the following information as a guide for conversation, and support, during times of need.

- **Reflect: *Begin with You*** – Any effort to assist your child(ren) should begin with self-reflection and support for yourself. Children are sensitive to the stress felt by adults and may withhold their needs so as to not burden others.
- **Assess: *What does your child know?*** - Asking your child what they already know allows you to be grounded in what information is really needed. Asking also builds trust that their opinions are important to you, even where you disagree, or need to offer clarification.
- **Listen: *Actively & Carefully*** – Listen for the thoughts, needs and feelings behind what is shared. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and any underlying fears or concerns.
- **Talk: *Honestly & Simply*** - Children benefit from honest, clear, and age-appropriate information. Withholding information can contribute to their natural anxieties and may give the impression that things are too horrible to discuss. Giving children a simple vocabulary for the expression of feelings and events helps with their sharing.
 - “Something very sad/bad has happened...”
 - “We don’t have all the answers yet, but I’ll let you know”
 - “We can talk more later...”
 - “I am sorry/sad also...”
 - “Do you have questions?”

This will be a continuing conversation. It will not, and does not, need to occur in one sitting.

- **Model: *Be an example*** – Sharing your feelings, and being honest about your emotions, is a good example to children. Let them know it is OK to feel....i.e., crying often helps us to feel better. Children benefit from seeing how appropriate coping looks. Hiding your feelings may give the impression that we don’t talk about things that are difficult. If you are having trouble managing your emotions, find support for yourself.



- **Stay Open: Questions may be repeated** – Children will often repeat questions about the death in an effort to gain understanding. Their comprehension may be limited by their developmental level. They may even exhibit a morbid curiosity about the details. Keep in mind that their curiosity is not intended to be hurtful or annoying. Be prepared to respond more than once, and with consistency, to the same questions. Unfortunately, we can't guarantee everything will be OK all the time. After a loss or a crisis, many children and adults need understanding and reassurance that they will be safe.

You may not have all the answers, especially to the “big” questions that children ask like “why.” Children ask questions we can't possibly have the answers for...i.e., “Is he in heaven? Am I still a sister?” Often, the best response is “What do you think?” This response opens the door to the conversation and an insight to their concerns and needs.

- **Safeguard: Limit exposure to the media** – Continued or repeated stories/images about a crisis event can be overwhelming to children. Younger children may believe that repeated images and news stories are separate events and that dangers have not passed. Exposure to the media can also contribute to your stress and will be perceived by those around you.

Focus on what you can control - taking care of our health, safety plans, talking about feelings, helping others. This may be an opportunity to discuss established plans for safety and family/community response.

- **Be Watchful: Common Responses** – It is common for children to feel confusion, anxiety, and have difficulty with attention or concentration after a loss or crisis event. Some may be agitated, irritable, defensive or withdrawn. Separation anxiety may occur and occasionally a child may exhibit regressive behavior like thumb sucking or bed-wetting. It's common for children to feel anxious about what has happened and how it will impact their lives. If the child had functioned well before the crisis, it is expected that they return to their previous behaviors within a few weeks.

- **Adjust: Patience, patience, patience** – Be patient with those around you, and with yourself. Feelings and behaviors can change over time. Focus on the adjustment to life after the event. It is an ongoing and long term experience.

- **Find Support: Connect with Others** – Often there are resources and others who are also making effort to provide assistance following a crisis. Working together allows for shared energy and a sense of strength that can help during the stress of crisis response. Be open to assistance and engage with family, friends, and professionals where needed.

The Children's Bereavement Center offer FREE Peer Grief Support Groups for children, teens, and adults after a death. Groups are available in South Florida at 10 site locations and online.



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