

# Supporting Children and Teens after a Murder or Violent Death

from The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

Explaining murder to children and teens can feel overwhelming. Here are some tips to help you talk with and support grieving children and teens after a violent death.

## Have simple, open discussions

### Tell the truth

*How do I tell my child or teen?* It's a question we hear a lot. Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in language children can understand. Let their questions guide what else to share. You do not have to describe in detail what happened (unless they ask, and then you should answer honestly). You might say, "Mommy died. She was stabbed and she died." Avoid euphemisms such as *passed away*, *went to sleep*, *crossed over*, or *lost*, as they can confuse children. Even though these discussions can be hard to have, being honest and open is an important first step in helping grieving children. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation, and also keeps children from using their limited energy and inner resources to figure out what happened.



**Many children don't want to talk about what happened because they worry others will tease them or say hurtful things.**

Children who are not told the truth often fill in the blanks themselves, sometimes with a story that is worse than what actually happened. They may worry they did something wrong or somehow caused the death. Reassure them this is not the case. With the public nature of many violent deaths, it's important for children to know the information that is available to the larger community. This will prevent them from hearing something for the first time at school or elsewhere.

### Be prepared for repetition

Don't be surprised if children ask the same questions over and over. The news can be very disturbing to children and they can only take in small bits of information at a time. This doesn't mean you did a bad job explaining. Children are just trying to make sense of what happened. You can help by repeating the same simple and honest explanation you gave about the death. It can be painful to have to repeat the story, but know that by doing so, you are helping children understand.

## Special issues after a murder

### The violent nature of death

Because of the violent nature of the death, children grieving a murder may experience nightmares and day terrors recreating the scene, fear for their and other's safety, and intense feelings of anger, revenge, or isolation. A child who was present during the murder can have unwanted visual memories of the scene. Even if they did not witness the murder, children often imagine what the scene looked like. In either case it can be helpful to connect the child with a qualified and supportive person, such as a counselor or therapist to talk with about their experiences. Play, art, and big energy activities allow them to process their experiences non-verbally because they often do not have words to describe the event.

### Law enforcement

When a violent death occurs and law enforcement is involved, children may be considered witnesses and told not to talk about the event. Sometimes the surviving parent or caregiver is considered a suspect and unable to be a support for the children. The family's home may be considered a crime scene, preventing the children from returning there for a length of time. In situations where the person who committed the crime is not found, children can have tremendous fear about whether the person will come after them or someone else in their family. One way to help is provide opportunities for them to talk about their worries or concerns. You can also help them identify ways to feel safe at home and school. This can be as simple going around the house together to ensure that doors and windows are locked, identifying a person at school for the child to connect with, or choosing a special stuffed protector animal to sleep with.

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## **Criminal Justice System**

After the investigation there may be a trial, and it can be several years after the death before the trial occurs. For children, particularly if they are considered a witness, it can be unsettling and upsetting for the process to take so long, with no definitive end date. It is not uncommon for families to feel as if they are postponing their grief until after the trial and sentencing is complete, only to find that whatever the outcome, it is a disappointment because it does not bring back the person who was killed. Prepare the child with appropriate information about what is happening and the results of the trial.

## **Media Attention**

Because of the public nature of crime, the media is usually very present and can be invasive in the family's life. News reports in newspapers, on TV or the internet are numerous. While it is helpful to limit children's exposure to news stories, it's also important to not withhold information about what happened.

## **Community Reaction**

There is still a large stigma surrounding murder. Families often encounter negative judgment and assumptions about the person who died. People are quick to equate murder with involvement with drugs, gangs, or illegal activity. This automatic association can be extremely isolating and painful for children. Some children will blame themselves for the death, thinking they could have done something to keep the person who died safe. Many children don't want to talk about what happened because they worry that others will tease them or say hurtful things about the person or their family. It is helpful to roleplay with the child what they can say when asked about the person's death. You can give them permission not to share anything if they don't want to tell others.

## **Change in worldview**

After a murder or violent death, a child's view of the world can change. It may no longer feel safe, and they may question the worth or value of life. They wonder how such a thing could happen. They may distrust people. It is also common for children and teens to question their religious and spiritual upbringing.

## **New behaviors**

### **Emotional reactions**

Children experience many different emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, powerlessness, loneliness, revenge, relief, and even joy. Sometimes children don't have any visible reaction at all. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong feelings in grief, just individual reactions.

You can support children and teens by listening to and acknowledging their emotions. With powerful feelings like anger, revenge, and fear, consider finding ways children can show their feelings without injuring themselves or anyone else. Tossing pillows, building and knocking down blocks, throwing nerf balls, scribbling with crayons, and running outside are a few examples of safe physical outlets. You can also remind children that while it's okay to have big feelings, "You are really, really angry right now, and that's okay," it's not okay to hurt anyone or anything, "You can be really angry, but you can't kick me or throw your toys at the dog."

### **Create space for play**

Children often use play, rather than talking, as a way to express themselves. Children grieving a murder might create play situations that explore violent themes, like dinosaurs killing other dinosaurs, army people shooting the enemy, or crashing trucks into walls. Their play is a way of trying to make sense of what has happened. Playing with dolls and puppets allows children to tell violent stories they can't share in other ways. Art materials provide a way to put feelings onto paper, so get out the crayons, paper, markers, paint, clay, and other supplies.

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You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of photos, or drawing a picture, but be open to their ideas and suggestions for projects. Journaling is another way for children to get their story out.

Some children will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression. After a violent death, children often experience chaotic energy, so be sure to create time and space for big energy play (like running or jumping,) that offers a safe outlet for strong emotions.

## Supportive environments



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### Remember the person who died

The stigma of violent death can keep people from talking about the person and sharing memories. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life: "Your daddy really liked this song," or "Your mom was the best painter I know." Children often appreciate pictures and possessions of the person who died. With photos, consider making copies to give to young children so that they can carry them around without the fear of tearing or damaging the originals. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures a child might like, ask which ones are important to them. You may want to remember or mark significant days such as the birthday of the person who died, or the anniversary of their death by going to the grave or special place, making the person's favorite meal, or lighting a candle and sharing a memory.

### Provide structure and routine

Life is often in upheaval after a violent death, so finding ways to establish predictability is helpful.

For example, you might create routines around breakfast, school, and bedtime. Children may also need some flexibility: This way they know what to expect (*bedtime is at 7:30 p.m.*) but can also trust that if they need something else (*tonight we can read an extra story*) their world will be responsive. Work with the child to provide a safe home environment.

### Offer choices

Children appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. When someone dies in a violent way, children can feel powerless and out of control. **Giving children choices can help them regain a sense of power** and trust they can have a say in their lives. Provide choices that are in line with their developmental level, for example: *Would you like cereal or toast for breakfast? Which stuffed animal would you like to sleep with? Who would you like to sit with at the memorial service?*

These are just a few tips for how to support children and teens grieving a violent death. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

### Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

### The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from over 40,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades. To order online, visit [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org) or [www.tdcbookstore.org](http://www.tdcbookstore.org) or call 503.775.5683.



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