

Supporting a child **bereaved by murder**



When murder or manslaughter is the cause of a death, then telling a child or young person can feel much harder than informing them of a death by natural causes. Because there is someone responsible for the death, it can leave children believing that the death could have been prevented.

News of a violent death brings an extra layer of devastation, shock and trauma to an already painful and difficult time for all involved. The world can suddenly seem a very unsafe place to be, and it is possible that your child may need a lot of support and reassurance in order to restore a sense of peace and a feeling of safety and that this healing might take a significant period of time. This can be particularly difficult if it takes time for the perpetrator to be arrested and charged.

Additionally, if your child knows the perpetrator, particularly if they had a good relationship with them; or if they witnessed the murder then it is possible that they might need specialist support at some point to help them come to terms with what has happened.

It is likely that you may also be grieving and your ability to support your child may be diminished as a result. It is important to attend to your own needs alongside those of your child as they will look to you for reassurance and support.

You may be offered help directly, but if that is not the case, consider enlisting the help of a trusted friend or family member to help identify relevant organisations offering advice and support. It can also be helpful for you and your child to visit your GP to help monitor if and when specialist psychological support might be needed.

How to respond initially

It is likely you will want to shield your child from the enormity of the situation, but due to the media coverage that violent death attracts, this is unlikely to be possible. Similarly, this kind of coverage forms a historical record and so being honest with your child whilst trying to provide some age-appropriate boundaries can be important in maintaining trust and a sense of safety for your child.

If you are the one to tell your child about the death, where possible, give yourself time to prepare what you want to say and think about how you might answer any difficult questions using simple, age-appropriate language. Words like 'stabbed and murdered' can be very emotive, think about using words like hurt and killed to put more of the focus is on the death rather than the violent circumstances. Be clear and factual, proceeding carefully.

Remember your child cannot 'unhear' what they have been told and descriptive details might leave them with thoughts and images they find disturbing, increasing their anxiety and affecting their sleep.

The level of detail you disclose may well depend on your child's age but also on the information you have at a given point in time. Due to the likelihood of an ongoing police investigation, it may take time for a full picture to be established and this can be difficult for all involved.

Inform your child that some of what you have to tell them might be hard to hear and give them choices about whether or not they want to know certain things. Reassure them that you will give them the information when they feel ready but be aware of the potential for them to find out via other means including the school playground and the internet.

Discuss with them the level of interest this death is likely to attract and make them aware of the possibility that not everything they hear about what happened will be true.

Continuing the support

It is likely you will have multiple conversations with your child as events unfold and the process of establishing who was responsible takes place. Particularly if your child witnessed the death, it is possible that they will experience things like flashbacks, intrusive images and sleep disturbance due to the level of fear they experienced. This may also occur if they were not present, due to the shock of what has happened and the fear of what might have been. Often these symptoms settle down during the first few weeks.

It can be helpful to focus on things that help your child feel safe and calm, and avoid detailed retelling of the events, either in person or through the media. However, it may be your child has certain questions that are troubling them and so a blanket ban on discussion can feel very isolating.

Support your child by encouraging them to express their emotions in healthy ways through things like talking (about their feelings rather than the story) through creative means or through exercise and being outdoors as appropriate. You may find it beneficial to seek support and advice from organisations with specialist experience of this type of bereavement and from your GP if your child is struggling with symptoms.

Within reason, sticking to normal routines and expectations of behaviour can help your child to feel safer and 'going through the motions' can be less taxing than thinking and can provide a numbing effect. However, this type of experience can challenge a person's whole way of being, both physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually and can shatter their beliefs about the world and their place within it. Your child's capacity for 'normal' may well be severely impaired and they will need time to heal and adjust to the trauma, this may be true of you too.

It is likely that your child may want to avoid social situations, struggle to concentrate and find rest and relaxation difficult. Contact your child's school and work with them to find a way to support your child through reducing and modifying expectations. This might be working in a smaller unit within the school, not having to manage larger situations like the playground, dinner hall or assembly and having regular access to a small number of dependable and supportive adults. It may be that being apart from you will cause your child distress, so be clear about where you are going and when you will be back as well as who will be collecting them from school.

Next steps

When a person dies due to an unknown, violent or unnatural cause, the case is referred to the coroner who will open an inquest to establish when, where and how the person died. The coroner's office conduct investigations which can take many months and at the end of the inquest process the coroner will decide on the cause of death and this will appear on the death certificate which will allow the death to be formally registered. Usually, the process involves a post-mortem and only after this has taken place will the body be released and a funeral can take place.

The usual rituals that are in place to say goodbye such as a funeral or cremation may be significantly delayed due to the investigation and post-mortem. Viewing the body may not be an option in the case of a violent death. Damage to the body can be very significant and deemed too distressing to see. It can be helpful to find alternative ways of marking the death which feel manageable for your child, for example laying flowers in a particular place, creating a tribute or putting a photo in a special frame.

Further support

This leaflet is written to support our two primary publications in the Little Gem series:

- Supporting a child when someone they love has died / Someone I love has died
- Someone significant has died – handling grief as a young person

Our other specialist leaflets include:

- Talking about and understanding death
- Supporting a child bereaved by suicide
- Building resilience following a bereavement
- Telling a child a friend has died
- Funerals and cremations
- Viewing a body with a child

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