

Talking is key

It is important that we do not try to protect our Children from bereavement the reason being, we can't, any more than trying to protect them from the news on TV, what their friends are talking about, or what they hear when adults talk or whisper on phone or in the home

While the desire to protect our children is normal and natural it is not always necessary nor is it always helpful for the child.

It's a question of, how much do I tell and often, when do I tell

There is a lot of news on TV, Social Media, in the shop, on the street, in the family and even in these days of Social Isolation Children will know that something is wrong, people are scared, parent, grandparents they may not know what Covid 19 is exactly but they will guess it is bad and may construct a mental picture of what it is that is full of assumptions, errors and fear

They may fill the gaps in their knowledge with these thoughts, assumptions, guesses and often they will self-blame, Did I do this, or is it because I was not good

They will of course be afraid themselves with the talk of so many dying, they may not fully understand what that means or how it happens

I suggest to you that it is better to tell them something rather than tell them nothing

Not knowing is difficult for children and young people they often feel vulnerable, fearful, and anxious and unfortunately anxiety, when it gets a hold, is a real problem

We often think/assume or possibly hope that our children are oblivious to what is happening when in fact most of the time they are playing the game of 'Keep it to yourself.' It is a game they learn very young and one that can be very problematic for them. Once this game is learned it can become a life tactic used when the child comes under stress they withhold information from parents because that is what you do when there are problems

After all they have learned that when things are bad you 'keep it to yourself'

Why talk about it, it does not change anything

There are many benefits of talking through matters and involving children in this conversation and in the preparation for bereavement and after the bereavement has occurred

It is no easy matter talking to children and young people about death or preparation for death; after all we struggle with these things ourselves, we are vulnerable also, we often don't know what to say and the most common fear is of upsetting someone in the case them and of course ourselves during the process

The first thing to think about is, how can you realistically prevent children from feeling upset, feeling anxious and feeling vulnerable especially when you are feeling all those things yourself

When we accept that these are normal reactions before or during grief then you move from avoidance to engagement, if you engage with your own feelings and talk about them then you are telling the child it's okay to feel and think this way, this is how I feel and together we will make this journey helping each other, and talking as we go

If you hold your grief to yourself internally then the child learns that this is something that is not to be talked about, therefore, I don't have permission to ask questions, I mustn't upset anyone, and they go further holding on to the bigger questions they may have such as, "Will you die" "Will I die" "What is death like" "Was this my fault"

As the adult you should give your child or children permission to talk even when it's not convenient or at least come back to their questions when it is convenient.

Children are ego centric they don't think about timing, if it isn't the right time for you to talk about the matter say something like "that is a great question, or interesting thought, let's talk about that later" after tea for example

Keep in mind there no 'Right Time' there is only Now

Talking to your children demonstrates to them a few things, that you trust them, that they should know, that what they feel, or think is important, and that none of this was their fault

Fear of what is happening, with no information from parents or other adults, results in children building monsters in their minds. Misunderstanding happen, anger increases, avoidance increases, and the child can slip into feelings of isolation, and guilt

A time for Talking and Listening

Choose a time when the child or children are normally quite or quieter, whether you are a single parent or couple, let the child know that there is something important to talk about and that they can ask questions after the talk

After meal may be best in your family, mid-afternoon but it's not a good idea to do this just before bed Your child will need time to grieve preferably with you if you do this leave time to for them to settle again before bedtime or sleep disturbance is likely

It is probably best not to have this conversation during a favourite program or activity either

You know your child; choose the time that suits you all and let everyone know it is going to happen

Keep it short, use simple sentences, short phrases, avoid big words and remember to allow gaps for questions and for you to keep hold of how you are feeling. Take deep breaths, keep good eye contact

And parent have the story sorted out before hand, and stay with the agreed story, don't add or take away from it while delivering the story and don't interrupt whoever is talking, give them the time they need to vent

You will get questions from left field, that is okay the child is trying to construct a framework for understanding something that maybe very new for them

Tell them in the living room keep other rooms free for their normal purposes so that the child can retreat to their bedroom and know that their bedroom was not the place they got bad news

At the End, or if you notice tears, ask them how they are feeling, " It is okay to feel or not feel we are all different and react differently. Ask them what they are thinking, do you understand, and while you talk leave gaps for them to clarify their understanding Finally ask them, do you understand and answer any questions they may have

Remember there are no bad questions the child is trying to understand something difficult

Don't close it all down too early and answer the questions that come later as best you can however it is okay to tell them lets talk about later or tomorrow but please Do answer the child later or tomorrow, don't think that they will have forgotten, they are waiting for you to allow them to talk

If you do not know something it is okay to say I do not know but I will try and find out

Don't use euphemisms things like 'Gone to heaven' 'Gone to sleep' 'Gone away for a long time,' 'on journey and not coming back

Say things like, ***** died, that means their body doesn't work anymore, they don't feel cold, they don't feel sick' 'they don't breathe,' 'they won't be coming back because they are dead'

Try not to overwhelm the child with too much information, do not use name of illnesses unless they are short and easy to understand and do not rush away or silence the child after you have spoken to them

If you cry that is a good thing, tears are allowed and indeed to be expected the child needs to know that you are feeling just as they are

Older children will need or ask for more details or information so be prepared for that

Be prepared for changes of behaviour, some children isolate, some start mothering or parenting the others in the family

There will be sleeplessness, regression, they may eat more or eat less try and manage these changes and try not to get into 'do this or else' anger will be present and may result after an ultimatum such as that

If you deal with bereavement or preparation for bereavement the pain will still be there but you will not have to be on guard all the time, the child will believe they can talk to you about their fears and anxieties and they will respect your boundaries, as much as they can for their age but please keep your word and allow them time to talk

That way there will be fewer misunderstandings and less opportunity for the child to blame others, themselves, or their behaviour prior to an event for what has happened

This journey made as a family will not be problem free however there should be more understanding of each other, more opportunity for you and your children to transition to a new world where someone is missing

I hope that this has been helpful we hope to add further resources in time in the meantime we suggest that you look at some good websites that could help for example children during or preparing for bereavement

- Cruse Bereavement Care
- Winston's Wish
- A Child's Grief
- Action Cancer
- Children's Hospice

There are others of course, these websites usually have lots of different resources for families to use when a loved one has died

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