

## **Talking about Death: Guidance for Parents**

**It is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing some feelings, e.g. anger, appropriately.

**Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behaviour, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.

**Have there been other bereavements in your family that your child may remember?** Your child may be more upset if this reminds them of another loss, perhaps of a family member or even a pet. They may even seem more upset about this person than they were when someone closer to them died. This is not unusual, and may reflect their developing understanding of death as they grow up.

**Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Your children will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

**Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

**Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** Young children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. Older children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Teenagers may have strong and varying opinions. Encourage all children and young people to verbalise their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!

**Monitor your own stress level.** Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counsellors can help. It is okay to let your children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

### **What Else Parents Can Do:**

**Focus on your child(ren) over the week following the critical incident.** Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.

**Make time to talk with your child(ren).** Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.

**Stay close to your child(ren).** Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give

plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.

**Maintain a “normal” routine.** To the extent possible stick to your family’s normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., ***but don’t be inflexible***. Children may have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.

**Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your child(ren) before bed.** These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.

**Safeguard your child(ren)’s physical health.** Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise, and nutrition.

**Consider thinking hopeful thoughts for those most affected.** It may be a good time to take your children to your place of worship, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting victims, survivors and their families.