

# Difficult Conversations Following an Unexpected Death



Giving a child or teen information that will upset them is scary. It is normal to feel anxious and uncertain about how to tell a child or teen that someone has died unexpectedly. Use the below as a guide to help you through that conversation and reach out to A Haven if you would like additional support.

## Be Honest and forthcoming.

Choose a time and location where you can sit with your child and be free from distraction. Tell them what happened in as few words and with as clear language as possible. Something like, *"I have some sad news to share with you. Uncle John died today."* Give the information, and then focus on being present with your child as they absorb this news.

*Note: It is okay for your child to see you cry or be upset, but if you think you will be overcome by emotion, ask someone your child knows and trusts to be with you or be the one to say the news. Be present to help support your child even if you feel like you will not be able to talk.*

## Give age appropriate details.

It is normal to want to protect children and teens from information that is upsetting or uncomfortable. Giving accurate, age appropriate information protects them from imagining worst case scenarios when they can sense that we are withholding. Use clear language and avoid euphemisms, which can be confusing. Honesty now builds trust for their ongoing grief journey. Young children may lack some key vocabulary, but still deserve to hear accurate information. For example when someone dies by suicide you could say *"their brain had a sickness that caused their death."* Older children and teens may have more of an understanding and be capable of hearing something like *"This feels hard to talk about, but Uncle John died by suicide."* You know best what your child is able to understand. If you need help finding the right words to use, reach out to A Haven for help.

## Answer only what you are able.

It is okay if you do not have all of the information. Your child may ask questions that you do not know the answer to: *"that's a good question but I do not know the answer. I can try to find out if it feels important to you?"* or questions that you do not know how to answer: *"I'm having a hard time talking about this right now, but your question is important to me. Can I collect my words and talk with you about it again later?"* Reach out for help in responding to those questions, and then **follow up** with your child. It is okay for your child to see that you, too, are shocked by the death and do not have all the answers. Honoring their questions and following up with them reaffirms for them that they can trust you to support their grief.

## Listen. Do not try to fix.

This is so hard, but you cannot take away the pain that your child may feel in response to this death. You may be surprised by the things they say or questions they ask, and the most healing thing you can offer at this time is the space and support for them to feel whatever they are feeling and say or ask whatever they are thinking.

## Set expectations.

Let your child know what the next days and weeks might look like. *"We will plan a funeral and family may be coming by the house. We can make sure you have a safe space to take a break if you need."* or *"I may cry and feel upset. That's normal and you don't need to try and fix that for me. It is okay for you to cry and be upset, too."* Know that A Haven is here as a support if you need help navigating through this time.



@ahaven.chesterco



info@ahaven.org



www.ahaven.org