

Talking with children about tragedies / Dr. Debbie Cohen

Children might be exposed to death when an animal, person or child dies in their vicinity. The level of exposure depends on how close the deceased is to the child. The deceased can be a member of a nuclear or extended family (parent, brother, grandfather, uncle, etc.), friend, brother of a friend, teacher, etc. Proper and sensitive management of tragic news involving a child is important for promoting healthy grieving processes and preventing pathological grieving processes.

From the moment of receiving notice of death in the family with a child to the notification of the news to the child:

There is a tendency in modern society to avoid talking about death, whether as a primary defense mechanism against the anxiety and pain or as part of a modern perception of man as controlling his environment and not as driven by forces stronger than himself. This tendency is reinforced when a child is involved. In these cases, the natural tendency to repress the subject is added to the desire to prevent the child the experience of pain or suffering. Thus, to allow him to grow up in an environment without painful events.

Principle 1: Suffering, and in its absolute form, death, is part of life at any age and this fact cannot be prevented .

Principle 2: In the event of death in the immediate vicinity of a child, we cannot prevent the child from encountering the subject of death. Even if the tragic news is not explicitly told to the child, the child at some point, will be exposed to the unfortunate information explicitly or indirectly.

Principle 3: Thus, the only choice the adult stands before is whether to let the child deal with this difficult issue alone, usually using his imagination to complete details that are unknown to him (how? why?), or alternatively to allow an experience of shared grief together with those close to him, who can be there to contain the emotions that arise and answer questions.

Principle 4: A child **of any age** must be notified of the death of someone close to him. Since the understanding of death matures gradually from age two to eleven years and is influenced by the characteristics of the child and the environment in which he grows up, the child must be informed of the event at any age, in a manner appropriate to his/her age and level of development.

Principle 5: Preferably the message should be told to the child by the person closest to him, preferably the child's parent. This person knows the child, the child trusts him/her and he is also the one who will continue to accompany the child in his life in the future. In many cases, the adult notifying the child will feel safer talking with the child if there is another close person or professional next to him at the time the message is delivered.

Principle 6: Do not postpone the moment of notification. From the moment the loss has occurred, the child must know about it as soon as possible. At the same time, a necessary delay in delivering the message, to prepare the adult for this complex role and to find a private and quiet place to deliver the message, is legitimate and correct. Gradual notification of the tragic event intensifies the child's suffering and undermines the child's trust in the adult and should therefore be avoided. In case of a justified delay, special attention should be paid to guarantee that the child is not exposed to the news through media or social networks, during the period of time until formally receiving the message. If possible, it is recommended to keep the child away from communication devices (especially cell phones) so that he will receive the message in an orderly manner and not by chance.

These six principles can help us cope with the natural mechanisms of denial and anxiety in the midst of an emotional storm in which one finds himself and to be emotionally available to be with the child and deliver the message in a way that will allow the child to cope with the disaster optimally.

If the parent objects to this process, do not act contrary to the parent's position. In such a case leave contact information and in many cases the parent will agree to conduct the difficult conversation after he/she calms down.

Guidelines for notification talk with children:

- **Tell the child the news in an age-appropriate language, but in the most direct way and in absolute terms** ("I am very sad to tell you that your father died"). Avoid speaking to the child in abstract and less clear terms, such as: "He is in heaven," "He always sees us." Such statements may lead the child to believe that the deceased will return to him and thus will not allow him to move on to the stage of grief. Note that in this document too, I chose to use the term 'dead' rather than softened terms such as 'deceased'.
- Since children sometimes have a partial understanding of the word 'dead', it is necessary to **emphasize the finality of behavioral, sensory, emotional, and social functions**. For example: "Dad died, his heart stopped working, he can no longer see, hear, feel...". If these words are said explicitly, the child will understand that he does not need to worry about the father who has passed away and can concentrate on his/her own grief and longing.
- It should be emphasized that **death is irreversible**. For example: "Dad can't come back to life." Children sometimes believe that death is temporary, reversible and that there are ways to bring the deceased back to life. Such a belief can cause feelings of guilt since he has not been able to bring the parent back to life. If the family finds it important to incorporate concepts of afterlife in the explanation, it is important to distinguish between the fact that the body stopped functioning and was buried in the ground, alongside the belief in the continuity of the soul / spirit in another world.

Include the cause of death in the notification. A precise and unequivocal definition of the cause of death, including a description of the event and the sequence of events, will enable the child to channel his/her anger and prevent unnecessary feelings of guilt. Obviously, the cause of death should be described in accordance with the child's developmental stage and abilities. Graphic details about the form of death should be avoided.

A child who has not been exposed to the cause of death may believe that he somehow caused the death of the person close to him. A child may attribute deadly power to feelings, thoughts, or words. Sometimes children will not share these feelings with others and will continue to walk around feeling guilty.

In the case of a sudden natural death, especially if the disease was unknown and the death was sudden, it is important to emphasize to the child the fact that the person who died was very ill even if we were not aware of his/her situation, that this type of death is extremely rare, and that most people are healthy or curable. This explanation helps calm the child's natural concern about the possibility that he or other people close to him may also die.

In the case of death from suicide, it is recommended to explain that there are people who suffer from a disease called 'depression' that makes them mistakenly think that everything is bad and that there is no solution to the situation and therefore they sometimes harm themselves. It is important to emphasize that there are treatments for depression and that most people with depression manage to cure this disease. It should be emphasized that suicide is a final solution to a temporary problem and that the most crucial step in healing is seeking help. Graphic details about the form of suicide should be avoided.

It is important to explain that **any reaction of the child at this stage is normal and legitimate.** We are accustomed to see a wide range of expressions of feelings of sorrow, pain, anger, and guilt; to restlessness, trying to avoid receiving the message, dealing with topics unrelated to death, playing and even laughter.

Among the measures that must be strictly followed:

a. **A psychologist will never go to a family home alone after a disaster.** Preferably, psychologists will come in pairs. If not possible, the psychologist can come together with a social worker from the social services department in the locality.

B. **Do not enter the family home before the deceased has been transferred** from the home.

c. At the beginning of the intervention, you should estimate how many personnel will be needed to cope with the event, and plan from whom you can request additional personnel, if needed. This is especially relevant when there are several foci for intervention.

D. At the end of the intervention, all the psychologists involved in the event should be convened at the various locations, and a dialogue should be held in which each person will describe his part in the chain of events, emotions will be expressed and lessons will be drawn.

The child's participation in death-related ceremonies:

A psychologist is often asked about a child's participation/non-participation in rituals related to death.

a. These ceremonies form a gradual process of mourning. The processes assist mourners in this process on a personal, family, social and communal level. The funeral itself confronts the child with two facts of irreversibility and the finality of death. Thus, if the child understands at least partially the concept of death (starting from the age of four) and the conditions listed below can be met, then it is appropriate to allow children to attend the funeral.

b. The adult responsible for the child who is familiar with the child and family customs, will decide whether it is relevant to ask the child if he/she chooses to attend the funeral. If the decision is that the child will not attend the funeral, it is important to think about alternative participation. For example, sending an object that he would like to put on the grave or what he would like to be said in his name. It is also important that the child visits the grave later. In this case, it is important to clarify who will remain with the child during the funeral.

c. If the adult decides that it is relevant for the child to attend the funeral, it is important to ask the child if he wants to attend the funeral. To help the child to decide, it is necessary to concretely describe what will happen at the funeral, including who will be with him during the funeral and whether acute emotional outbursts are expected. You can also ask your child if he wants to actively attend the funeral (e.g., lay flowers, read something he wrote). Alternatively, explain to the child where he will be and who will be with him if he decides not to attend the funeral.

D. If the child does attend the funeral, it is important to appoint an adult close to him who can accompany him during the funeral. It is recommended that the child and the accompanying adult stand at some distance from the burial itself. It is also recommended to tell the child in advance that whenever he wants, he can leave the funeral.

E. At the end of the funeral, it is important to talk to the child about what happened at the funeral, including events of severe emotional outbursts.

The family is an important emotional anchor for the child, especially in times of crisis. It is important to emphasize to the child the fact that the family continues to function after the death of one of its members. It is important to encourage the child to experience this period together with the rest of the family, and it is also important that

the parent continues to be the primary caregiver of the child after death and that he/she encourages the child to express feelings and thoughts.

G. The child should be allowed 'breaks' in mourning, according to his own pace and needs and those of the rest of the family. During this time, the child can engage in activities that calm him and distract him. The child can be allowed to go outside, play with friends, and even stay at the home of close friends. Some children express a desire after a few days to return to kindergarten or school.

H. Encouraging continued contact with the child's support circles (school, friends, neighbors). It is important to inform these circles about death as soon as possible, so that they too can take part in supporting the child and continue to give him a sense of belonging. Visits by educational staff and classmates should be encouraged, in a regulated and orderly manner (below).

I. When the child returns to school, the child should be encouraged to return to routine in all the circles of which he is a part (family, school, friends, extracurricular activities). One must find the golden path between inclusion and sensitivity to encouragement and a return to the life to which he was previously accustomed. The child's return to routine will allow him to feel security and inner peace. Beware of disrupting this routine due to a desire to compensate the child for the death he experienced.

J. In cases of unusual phenomena or behaviors (for example, fears, depression, violence, seclusion, suicidal thoughts or behaviors, complete disregard for death, physical pain without medical explanation, use addictive substances) that persist for a long time (more than a month), it is recommended to seek the help of a professional who will check the need for additional help. Keep in mind that most children who have experienced traumatic loss do not need psychological treatment. However, in the event of sudden death in the family (murder, accident, or suicide), treatment is recommended.

Intervention at the educational setting (kindergarten / school), Regarding the death of a relative of a child in the setting or of a member of the school staff.

Upon learning of the death of a family member of a child, child or staff member, the school emergency team will convene, usually including the following: school principal, educational counselor, school psychologist. At this time, it is important that an emergency team has as many details as possible regarding the incident: what happened, to whom, when, family structure, sibling ages and educational settings. Make sure that the notice has reached the other relevant parties (directors of other settings, director of the education department, director of the social services department). It is recommended that a single school entity be appointed to manage the communication with an agreed member of the family .

In light of the data collected, the school emergency team will decide on the school action plan. This plan will take into account the family's preferences and the needs of the children and the community. It is necessary to map the circles of vulnerability) and

plan a separate plan for each of the circles. The guiding principles, adapted to the age of the children, are also compatible with intervention, if necessary, in kindergarten.

The intervention plan at the educational setting should include the following steps:

1. **Issuing a notice to the school staff** that includes notice of the incident and an invitation to gather in the teachers' room before the beginning of the school day.
2. If the event has been published, it is also possible to **issue a short notice to the school community** with a notice of the event and the fact that a dialogue is expected to take place in the classrooms under the guidance of the educational psychological service in the locality. Promise to keep up to date on what is happening and end with an available phone number for parents in distress.
3. **Gather the educational staff together, about half an hour before the beginning of the school day, to announce the event and offer guidelines for classroom conversations.** This gathering serves as a model for teachers regarding the intervention they will be asked to lead in their classrooms. Depending on the age of the children and the proximity to the event, the level of discourse in the various circles will be decided and it will be explained that any response to the event must be received without judgment. In addition, instructions will be given to be alert to children who are in distress and will need additional response, whether because of their proximity to the event or because of their characteristics (for example, particularly sensitive children, children who have recently experienced loss, special education children). It is also recommended to check with the educational staff if any of them need assistance with the intervention in their class. Staff members should be informed of the location of the professional assistance team that will respond to children in distress during the day. It is recommended that a professional will be available on the school grounds. It is recommended to schedule a sharing call after the class interventions.
4. **It is recommended to begin the school day with a intervention in the classrooms about the event.** It is recommended that the conversation be done by or in the presence of the class teacher. If this is not possible, the conversation should not be postponed and should be held by another party (professional teacher, counselor, principal, psychologist). In the classroom closest to the event or in the classroom where a staff member has requested assistance, it is recommended that another staff member accompany the teacher during the call. In parallel with the conversations in the classrooms, it will be decided on a school hotline that will be staffed by another psychologist. This center will be prepared to provide an individual response to children in distress who need an answer in addition to the class conversation.

Suggested structure for discourse in kindergarten / classroom:

A. **Provide factual and reliable information** regarding the incident (for example:

"Unfortunately, yesterday at 8:00 P.M., Danny's father died of... We are here to help you.").

B. Encourage ventilation of impressions, reactions, emotions, ask for responses to open-ended questions, for example, "Does anyone want to tell us when they heard about the event and how they felt?" Invite children to share concerns and questions about the event).

c. Normalize feelings and thoughts following the event. for example, "When children hear about such a thing, they can react in all sorts of ways, such as being sad, crying, wanting to do something else and not thinking about it, not knowing what to do, feeling confused. It is important to know that any response to a situation is fine. There is no right or wrong way to respond".

D. Create an opportunity to identify coping forces. For example, inviting children to share similar events and what they did to feel safer, inviting children to identify significant support factors in their environment). It is recommended to direct the children not to be left alone on this day and even to check with the children what their plans are for the afternoon hours.

E. Create an opportunity to think together about age-appropriate ways of the class/kindergarten to support the child in the closest circle of vulnerability (e.g., draw personal or class drawings, send personal or class videos or letters).

F. Explain to children, in an age-appropriate manner, about the death related ceremonies. Elementary school children are not supposed to attend the funeral of someone who is not in their immediate family, but children should be encouraged to visit the child at home during mourning days. It is important to describe ahead of time what they are likely to meet at the child's home and talk about how appropriate it is to behave in this situation (below).

Specific highlights:

In the event of death from illness – be aware that the event is likely to raise children's anxiety about their health and that of those close to them. It should be clarified that the person who died had a serious and rare disease, that doctors usually manage to cure sick people, but in this case they tried to treat him and were unsuccessful .

In the case of death from suicide – it is recommended to explain that there are people who suffer from a disease called depression and as a result they think that everything is bad and that there is no solution to the situation, so they sometimes hurt themselves. It is important to emphasize that there are treatments for depression and most people with depression manage to cure this disease. It should be emphasized that suicide is the final solution to a temporary problem and that the first step on the road to healing is seeking help. Graphic details about the form of suicide should be avoided .

In the case of specific children who are at an elevated level of distress, it is recommended to refer them for specific individual reference at the school helpline

opened for this purpose. A child must be sent to the hotline with an escort (aide or other child from the class). If a child receives attention at the hotline, his parents should be notified .

If parents raise the question, it is important to clarify **that children of kindergarten and elementary school age are not supposed to attend the funeral of someone who is not from their immediate family** .

It is recommended to **encourage condolence visits for mourners**, in small groups and accompanied by an adult, in coordination with the grieving family. It is recommended that children come in groups of 2-4 children for visits of 15-30 minutes. The customary visiting hours should be defined, and it should be emphasized that one should not come to comfort mourners at the expense of school hours and should not stay after the hour set by the family .

After the talks are held, it is recommended that the school issue an orderly notice to the school community. The message will include the following information:

- Details of the event itself.
- Description of the intervention conducted at the school.
- A statement that normalizes different reactions of children to the event.
- Instruction not to leave children alone for the next 24 hours.
- An invitation to have another dialogue with the children on the subject at home.
- If appropriate, details regarding the funeral and condolences of mourners.
- End the letter with contact details available to parents concerned about their child's condition. 8.

It is recommended to hold another discussion in the teachers' room on the same day after the discourse is held in the classrooms. The purpose of the dialogue is to hear impressions from the staff about the discourse in the classrooms, to give the staff an opportunity to ventilate emotions and to update about specific children who are in distress and need additional responses.

If the tragic event occurs while the school is not open (vacation, lockdown, etc.), an opportunity should be allowed for an online or face-to-face meeting with parents and students.

It is important to inform the grieving family about the intervention conducted at school/kindergarten. If the family objects to these steps, it is recommended to explain to the family the reasoning behind the steps. If there is still objection, it is recommended to conduct a dialogue about adapting the steps to the family's wishes (for example, when and what exactly was said). If the family still objects, the school staff will be instructed to conduct the dialogue in the classrooms by responding to information coming from the children.

