

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENS WHEN SOMEONE DIES FROM SUBSTANCE USE



When someone dies from substance use, explaining it to children and teens can feel overwhelming and intimidating. This is especially true when our urge is to try to protect them from the stigma and shame that can surround this type of death. Here are some tips for talking with children and teens about a death from substance use and ways to support them in their grief.

Grief is unique to each person and every family. Please adapt these suggestions as needed.

## **Tell the truth**

How do I tell my child or teen? It's a question we hear a lot. Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened, in language children can understand, and let their questions guide what else to share. You don't have to describe in detail what happened, but try to answer their questions honestly. Depending on the circumstances and your child's developmental level, you might say:

- Your dad died last night. His liver stopped working from drinking more alcohol than was safe for his body.
- I have very sad news. Mommy died of something called an overdose. She took more medication than the doctor told her to and it made her body stop working.
- Your sister died last night from an overdose of a drug called heroin. We don't know if she took too much on purpose or by accident.

Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they are confusing, especially to young children.

Being honest and open minimizes confusion and keeps children and teens from using their energy and resources to try and figure out what happened. Children who are not told the truth often fill in the blanks,

sometimes with a story that is worse than what actually happened. Some children and teens may even think they somehow caused the death, especially if no one will tell them what happened. News travels fast, and it is important for children to hear about the death from a caring adult rather than through social media or gossip.

## **Remember that words matter**

There are some words and ways of talking that can add to the shame and stigma surrounding a death from substance use. Although they are common, consider avoiding words like addict, abuse/abuser, overdose death, and clean. Instead, try saying, he struggled with substance use, her body became dependent on medication, or they had a disease that made them use more (alcohol, medicine, or drugs) than was safe for their body. Using this language decreases stigma and judgment and enables us to talk about death from substance use the way we would any other mode of death.

It also emphasizes the worth of the person who died rather than labeling them based on how they died. Negative comments such as, she was so selfish, he was



weak, no wonder he couldn't stop, and what a cowardly way to go, are not helpful. If questions come up, you can ask, You're wondering if Daddy was being selfish. What do you think? You can then add something to help them better understand how substance use affects people's brains and bodies.

### The question Why?

Why? is a common question when someone dies from an overdose of substances. While children and teens might understand the physical reasons someone dies, they may have a lot of questions about substance use, the difference between substances, or why the person who died wasn't able to stop drinking or using drugs. If children and teens didn't know about their person's substance use, they may need more information about how using substances affects people. You can support children and teens by explaining there are many factors that can lead someone to die from substance use, and one of those may be a history of using substances inappropriately.

Children and teens might blame themselves and wonder if they could have done something to prevent the death. They may also fear they or someone else they care about will die from substance use. You can reassure them the death was not their fault and there was nothing they could have done or said to make the person stop using substances. You can also offer support by listening, encouraging them to come to you with questions and concerns, and helping them find ways to express their thoughts and emotions.

### Allow for a variety of emotional reactions

Children may experience many different emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, powerlessness, loneliness, shame, guilt, numbness, and relief. Their reactions may depend on their age, personality, experiences with death, and developmental level. Sometimes children don't show any visible reaction at all. Grief looks and feels different for everyone and can be shaped by their age, relationship with the person who died, race, culture, gender, support system, and other factors in the

unique identity constellations of children and teens.

With powerful emotions like anger and fear, offer options for children to safely express them. Remind children that while it's okay to have big feelings, it's not okay to hurt anyone or anything.

- You are really, really angry right now, and that's okay. You can punch the punching bag or stomp on the bubble wrap, but you can't kick me or throw your toys at the dog.
- You're feeling scared that if anyone takes medication they will die too. Remember that medication is almost always safe when someone takes the amount the doctor or nurse tells them too. The next time one of us has to take medicine, we can read the directions together to make sure we're taking the right amount, okay?

### Listen, compassionately

When children and teens are grieving, people can be quick to offer advice and give opinions. What's most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or evaluating. It can be tempting to minimize their feelings, or convince them to think or feel differently than they do. If it's a case of misinformation, it's helpful to provide the correct details, but still allow them to express their take on things. Sometimes the best response is to validate their thoughts and feelings. For example, You really get uncomfortable when kids at school talk about hating their mom. You wish they knew what it's like to have a mom die. Responding in this way helps children and teens trust you will listen and makes it more likely they will come to you when they're hurting or need advice. You don't have to have all of





the answers. It's okay to say, I don't know.

### **Create routines and consistency**

Life is often in upheaval after a person dies from substance use. Creating a predictable daily routine helps

re-establish a sense of safety and security. Examples include routines around: breakfast, getting to school, after-school, chores, and bedtime. Let children and teens know what you expect, but be prepared to be flexible. This helps them trust that if they need something, the people in their world will be responsive.

Here's what that might sound like:

Bedtime is at 8 pm, but I know today was really tough so we can read an extra story (children).

The trash needs to go out by Monday evening. I'll help you this week and you can try on your own next time (teens).

### **Provide choices**

When someone dies, children can feel powerless and out of control. Giving children choices can help them regain a sense of power, control, and trust that they can have a say in their lives. Provide day to day choices that are in line with their developmental level. For example, Would you like hot or cold cereal for breakfast? I need help with dinner, would you like to set the table or clear the dishes? The lawn needs to be mowed, would you rather do it after school today or Saturday morning?

It's also important to let children and teens make choices about issues directly related to the death and their grief. Examples include asking if they want to

help with sorting the belongings of the person who died — and which items they would like to keep — and how they want to acknowledge significant days such as holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of the death.

### **Make space for play and creativity**

Children and teens often turn to play, movement, and creativity to express themselves and make sense of their situation. Consider offering opportunities for playing with dolls and puppets, creating art of all kinds (remember the process is more important than the product), and writing, journaling, and making videos. Big energy play like running, punching a bag, shooting hoops, pounding on a drum, and sports can be safe ways to express strong emotions, as can playing an instrument, writing songs, or simply listening to music.

### **Remember the person who died**

Remember and talk about how the person lived rather than just about how they died. Their life was unique and important. After someone dies from substance use, people often avoid talking about them because they don't know what to say. Grieving children and teens might worry that people will say hurtful things about the person who died and others struggling with substance use. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life: Your brother really liked going fishing with you, or Your mom was a great cook, I know you loved her pancakes. Sometimes just remembering to say the person's name can be very meaningful.

### **Funerals, memorials, and celebration of life services**

Many families who have had someone in their lives die from substance use wonder if they should hold a service and if children should be allowed to attend. Every family is different, but we've learned from children and teens that having some way of honoring the person is important. Ask children and teens how much they want to be involved in the planning. They often have clear ideas about how they want to honor the person who died.

### Prepare for returning to school

School can provide routine, familiarity, and consistency for children and teens who are grieving. It can also be a source of stress, depending on how understanding and flexible the school community is. Talk with teachers and other staff about the death and how they can be supportive. Ask children and teens what they would like to share with their classmates and others in the school, and help them plan how they will respond to questions about what happened.

Here are some examples:

- My brother died from substance use.
- My mom died from taking too many pills.
- My dad died. That's all I want to say right now.

You might find that members of the school community know more about the person's death than you and your children planned to share. Consider preparing children and teens for unexpected and sometimes unkind questions and comments.

### Find sources of support for yourself

If you are parenting or supporting a grieving child, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. This doesn't mean hiding your grief from children and teens. Rather, it means ensuring that you have people and activities in your life that are sources of comfort and inspiration.

By accessing support, you model ways for children and teens to take care of themselves, and reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them.



### Get extra help if needed

While most children and teens will ultimately return to their prior level of functioning following a death, some are potentially at risk for developing challenges such as depression, difficulties at school, or anxiety. Some families find it helpful to attend a support group where they can connect with others who are also grieving a death. While friends, family, or a support group may be enough for most children, others may require additional assistance. If you notice ongoing behaviors that interfere with a child's daily life, seek the advice of a qualified mental health professional. Don't be afraid to ask about their experience and training in supporting children and teens who have had someone die from substance use. If anyone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text HELLO to 741741. They are available 24/7.



The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families

#### Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](http://dougy.org) or [dougybookstore.org](http://dougybookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.

#### About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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