



## Telling Children the Truth about Difficult Deaths

*Telling children about a death is difficult and unfamiliar territory for most adults. The task is even more difficult when the death was a violent death or the result of suicide. Children need to be told the truth about all deaths. In over thirty years of working with grieving children, we have never encountered a child who was glad he was told a made-up story.*

### Why you should tell the truth:

- Making up a story about what happened sets children up for a lifetime of doubting what they have been told and mistrusting the adults in their lives.
- Children can handle the truth if it is delivered in developmentally appropriate language.
- Children often know the truth anyway. Sometimes what they have heard is not factual or provides only a portion of the story, leaving them to make up the rest.
- Telling children the truth helps establish open and honest communication.
- Telling children the truth helps them feel included in the family process and builds trust.
- It gives children an accurate narrative to grieve and to tell others.
- It relieves everyone of the burden of maintaining lies.
- Children learn how the family deals with difficult times and learn honest coping skills from the family.

### Tips for how to tell the truth:

- Favorite, supportive adults should be present.
- Sit in a quiet, private, safe, neutral setting. Location is important as the child will most likely remember the conversation for years. Give thought to the location that may hold this memory.
- Sit eye level with the child and provide comforting, reassuring touch. You may want to give younger children a stuffed animal to hold.
- Give straightforward, factual information. Be careful not to share graphic details that create disturbing images for the child.
- Give information in small bits, allowing the child to digest each piece. Be guided by the child's questions.
- Give a thorough explanation but do not over share about details.
- Be prepared for any reaction ---no emotion, extreme emotions, lots of questions.
- Remain present with the child as long as he or she wishes. Let the child know he can ask questions and talk about it again when he wishes.
- Prepare the child for how to respond to harsh questions or statements he may hear from friends and classmates. Give him tools to deflect questions and let him know he does not have to provide explanations to anyone.
- It is okay to say, "I don't know," if the child asks for information you don't have.
- Let the child know you are not going to keep secrets and will provide honest information.

No one should  
grieve alone!