Supporting a Child/Teen after a Murder or Violent Death
from The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

Explaining a murder or violent death to a child or teen can feel overwhelming and intimidating. We want to protect the child from the horror of such a death. Many of the issues facing a child are unique to the murder, for example: the violence of the death, dealing with law enforcement and the judicial system, and the public nature of the death. We are here to offer support. These tips will help you navigate how to talk with and support a grieving child after a murder or violent death.

SPECIAL ISSUES AFTER A MURDER
The violent nature of the death
If the child witnessed the murder they may experience a traumatic reaction. This can include nightmares and day terrors recreating the scene, fear for their and others’ safety, and intense anger or isolation. If they did not witness the murder, they will often imagine what the scene looked like. In either case it is important to provide the child with a supportive person to talk with about their experience. Play or art therapy may be helpful ways for the child to process their grief without having to retell their story in words.

Law enforcement
When a violent death occurs, it is considered a crime and law enforcement is involved. A child may be considered a witness and told not to talk about the event. Sometimes the surviving parent is considered a suspect and is not available to the child for support. There are times when the person who committed the crime is not found and that may cause great anxiety for the child, worrying that they may be the next victim. The child’s home may be considered a crime scene and not open to return to for some length of time. Provide the child with lots of support during this time, allowing them to share their worries or concerns. Help them find ways to feel safe in their home and school environment. This can be as simple as checking together to be sure the doors and windows are locked, or offering a dream catcher or special stuffed animal protector to sleep with.

Criminal Justice System
After the investigation, there may be a trial, which may not be held for a year or more after the death. For children, particularly if they are considered a witness, it keeps the issue ever-present, with no timeline for it to end. It is not uncommon for families to postpone their grieving until after the trial and sentencing is complete, only to find that whatever the outcome, it is a disappointment because it does not bring back the person who was killed. Prepare the child with information about what is happening, and, when the trial is over, share the results.

Media Attention
If the death and circumstance were made public, media may be present and can be invasive in the family’s life. News reports in newspapers or on TV or the internet are numerous. It is helpful to limit the child’s exposure to these stories. Over-exposure to the information can be
challenging to a child.

Community Reaction
There is still a large stigma about murder in our communities. It is not uncommon for children to feel isolated, that the person who died was a criminal, or that it was somehow their fault that their family member was killed. Often children don’t want to talk about or share their story for concerns about being teased or somehow blamed for the death. It is helpful to role-play with the child things they can say when asked about the person’s death. You can give them permission not to share anything if they don’t want to tell others.

Change in worldview
After a murder or violent death a child’s view of the world can change. The world may no longer feel safe, and they may question the worth or value of life. Children might wonder how such a thing could happen to them and their family. They may distrust people. It can help to listen to their concerns and help them develop a safety plan for themselves and their family.

SIMPLE, OPEN DISCUSSIONS
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 then let their questions guide what else to share. You do not have to describe in detail what happened. You might say, “Mommy died. She was stabbed in the heart and she died”. Fill in details as the child asks for additional information. For example if the child asks “Who killed her?” your response could be “A man broke into the house and when he saw your mom he stabbed her in the heart.” Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they can confuse children.

Children often overhear parts of stories and if they are not told what happened, will make up a story that makes sense to them - often worse than what actually happened. Being general in this situation can create anxiety for young children. Children may worry that they did something wrong or that they somehow caused the death. Reassure them that this is not the case. It’s important to explain what happened, while emphasizing that they are not the cause. You could say “Your dad was killed by the neighbor, it was not your fault, you did not cause him to die.”

Even though these discussions can be hard to have, know that being honest and open is a really important first step in helping grieving children. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation, and also keeps children from having to use their limited energy and inner resources trying to figure out what happened.

Be prepared for repetition.
Don’t be surprised if children ask the same questions about the death or the person who died over and over. The news can be very disturbing to a child and they can only take in a little bit of information at a time. This doesn’t mean you did a bad job explaining; Children are just trying
to make sense of what happened. You can help by repeating the same simple and honest explanation you gave about the death. It can be painful to have to repeat the story again and again, but know that by doing so you are helping children understand.

NEW BEHAVIORS

Allow for emotional reactions.

Children may experience many different emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, powerlessness, loneliness, revenge and joy. Sometimes children don't have any visible reaction at all. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong feelings in grief, just individual reactions. Children tend to go quickly from one emotion to another, sobbing one minute and asking for a snack the next. You can support children by listening to and acknowledging their emotions. With powerful emotions like anger, revenge and fear, consider finding ways that children can show their feelings without injuring themselves or anyone else. Tossing pillows, building and knocking down blocks, throwing nerf balls, scribbling with crayons, and running outside are a few examples of safe physical outlets. You can also remind children that while it’s okay to have big feelings (“You are really, really angry right now, and that’s okay”), it’s not okay to hurt anyone or anything (“You can be really angry, but you can’t kick me or throw your toys at the dog, you can punch the punching bag or stomp on the bubble wrap”).

Create space for play.

Children often use play, rather than talking, as a way to express themselves. It is not uncommon for children to have violent play, trying to make sense of what has happened. They may kill their action figures or play war where lots of people die. They may talk about or draw violent acts and blood.

Playing with dolls and puppets allows children to tell their stories. Art materials provide a way to put feelings onto paper, so get out the crayons, paper, markers, paint, clay, and other supplies. You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of photos, or drawing a picture, but be open to their ideas and suggestions for projects. Writing in journals is another way for children to get their story out.

Some children will be more drawn to physical activity than creative expression. After a violent death, children often experience chaotic energy, so be sure to allow time and space for them to engage in big energy play, like running or jumping, that offers a safe way to express strong emotions.

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Remember the person who died.

Children may not have many memories about the person who died. After a violent death people tend to avoid talking about the person who was killed. The stigma keeps people from sharing memories. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person’s life:
“Your daddy really liked to go fishing with you,” or “Your mom was a great cook, I know you loved her pancakes.” Children often appreciate having pictures and possessions of the person who died. With photos, it’s helpful to make copies to give to young children so that they can carry them around without the fear of tearing or damaging the originals. Rather than guess which keepsakes, clothing, or pictures a child might like, ask which ones are important to them.

**Routines and consistency provide safety for children.**
Life is often in upheaval after a violent death, so finding ways to create predictability and safety is very helpful for the child. Examples could include: create routines around breakfast, getting to school, after school, chores, and bedtime. Children may also need some flexibility: this way they know what to expect (bedtime is at 7:30pm), but can also trust that if they need something else (tonight we can read an extra story), their world will be responsive.

**Give young children choices.**
Children appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. When someone dies in a violent way, children can feel powerless and out of control. Giving children choices can help them regain a sense of power and control of their world and trust that they can have a say in their lives. Provide choices that are in line with their developmental level, for example: *Would you like hot or cold cereal for breakfast? Do you want to wear the blue or green shirt to school? Choose two books to read for bedtime.*