

Behavior & Development (<https://childrensmid.org/category/browse-by-topic/behavior-development/>) • Mar 20, 2012

## SADD NEWS: How to tell your child a friend has died

"What do I say to her?" The broken-hearted question asked by a mom when she learned her daughter's friend had been one of those killed in a headline-grabbing triple murder/suicide this last Saturday. As adults, it is hard for us to get our own minds around the idea that a child we know has been killed. How then, do we begin to explain it to our children?

According to Dr. Dehra Glueck, Clinical Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Center at Washington University School of Medicine, "The goal is to first elicit what the child knows and is worried about – especially with older children that may have different questions and fears".

Here are some key points to giving children sad news about the death of a friend, and a few extras for this specific tragedy:

This acronym **SADD NEWS** can help you remember the key points:

- **Setting:** Prepare to talk to your child by doing some physical things that will allow you to be calm. Find a place that is quiet and neutral, not a bedroom. Pick a time that is quiet and not rushed. Turn off the TV. Pick a time when you won't be rushing out the door or going right to bed. All of this allows you to be at your best and your child to have time to ask questions while you are together. If the news only impacts one child, make arrangements for the others to be out of the room or, if possible, out of the house to allow your child your full attention.
- **Actual and Factual:** Keep your explanation short and honest. Misleading or lying to a child leads to confusion later when he may over hear others talking. Talking too much can confuse children. *"I have to talk to you about something very sad. Your friend died*

*last night "If your child is under 4, explain further: " This means that she is gone forever and not going to come back."*

- **Decompress and Decide:** Give the child time to think while sitting quietly next to you. Respond to any questions or statements with short answers. Decide what to say based on if the information meets the goal of making your child feel safe and clarifies misunderstandings.
- Encourage your child to talk about her thoughts and feelings if she says nothing after a few minutes. Let her know it is ok to feel sad and to ask questions: *" This makes me very sad. How do you feel? What questions do you have?"*
- Limit the amount of information you give.

When discussing more, remember:

1. **Need to know only:** talking about how much blood was in a room, or the fact that someone lost an arm in the accident are not important and can frighten the child.
  2. **Explain what happened in simple terms.** *He died in a car accident.* The fact it occurred at rush hour on Hwy 40, is not important. Keep it brief to allow child to process the information.
  3. **Wait for additional questions.** Encourage your child to talk about questions and feelings as time passes. If your child doesn't ask right away how her friend died, it is ok to wait a day or two and then discuss more.
  4. **Support:** Depending on the situation, you may also be dealing with difficult emotions. Seek out support via friends, family, your physician or credible resources so you can emotionally equipped to support your child.
- What to say when a child was killed by the parent or someone commits suicide:

Her mommy was very sick. Not sick like you sometimes get when you get a runny nose or cough, but sick in her brain that made her think things that were not true. She was so confused that she did something to make Samantha die. This sickness doesn't happen to many mommies. This is the first mommy I have ever known that got this kind of sick.

- Some examples for differing situations:
  - *He died in a car accident. Car accidents are very rare. They don't happen often. Dad drives slowly, and we all wear seat belts and sit in car seats to stay safe.*
  - *She died of cancer. Cancer is something that happens to very small numbers of kids. You can't get cancer from being friends with someone who has cancer. Medicines can help many kids with cancer. Sometimes medicines don't work, and the child dies. We go see to see your doctor for well visits so he can give you a check up and make sure you are healthy.*