

Telling a child that someone they love is going to die

It can be devastating for adults to discover that someone in the family is going to die and the thought of explaining the news to children can be extremely distressing and daunting. The time frame of the illness and the ages of the children will determine at what point they need to be told and how this can best be done.

Sometimes, parents may wish to protect their children from knowing the truth for as long as possible. It is important however, to consider the following:

- Children usually sense when something is seriously wrong, however hard adults may try to hide things from them. Even very young children pick up on mood changes and any alterations to their usual routine
- Even though adults may try to keep bad news away from them, children often overhear conversations not intended for their ears
- Children are often more able to deal with the truth and painful information than adults think they are
- If children sense something is wrong they may invent their own explanations, which can result in them feeling upset, worried or to blame
- Children who are not told the truth may feel resentful when they discover that other people knew the person was going to die, but they didn't
- Telling children that someone they love is going to die allows them the opportunity to begin to prepare for the death and a chance to say their goodbyes.

How do I tell my children?

There is never an easy time, or an easy way, to tell a child that someone they are close to is going to die.

However, you may find it helpful to:

- Plan beforehand what you are going to tell the children
- Give them the information in stages. They may not be able to absorb it all in one go
- Consider when will be the best time and place to tell them
- Consider the ages of the children and whether to tell siblings together or separately It is important to:
 - Be as open and honest as you can
 - Try to use words that children will understand. It is okay to name the illness

Avoid using descriptions that can be misunderstood, for example 'Mummy is going to go to sleep'. This may seem like a more gentle explanation but can cause anxiety about sleep and bedtime

Let the children know that they can talk to you again if they need to and can ask you any questions that they may have

Explain to family members and close friends what you have told the children so that they do not give them conflicting information

It is not unusual for:

You to become upset when you tell your children

Children to react in different ways. Some may ask questions, whereas others may not want to talk about it. They may become upset or angry, or they may appear 'matter-of-fact' and ask questions like 'What's for tea?' or 'Can I go and play now?' This does not mean that they do not care, it simply means that they are processing the information differently.

Issues for single parent families

Children need reassurance that they will be cared for no matter what. A very common question they ask is 'Who will look after me?' It is very important that a single parent who is dying makes arrangements for the care of their children and that these plans are communicated to the children.

If you are unsure as to when to tell your children, or how to explain things to them, please contact us. We will be able to discuss your concerns and help you to find ways to talk to your children about the situation.

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