

## Explaining a Substance-Related Death to Children

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It is important to be honest when talking with children about any death. When the death is sudden and traumatic, sometimes our instinct is to shield them from the reality and truth about the situation. However, it is vitally important that you not lie to the child. Kids need to know the facts and truth about the death of someone they love before they can truly begin to grieve. If a child is not told the truth at the outset, eventually the truth WILL be discovered – from the media, a neighbor, a classmate...better it first come from a caring adult in that child's life. Children deserve to have the grown-ups in their lives be honest with them rather than confuse them with half-truths or lies.

Using age appropriate language, explain what happened. The amount of information should be determined by their age and understanding. Keep it simple and short, then provide additional information as they ask questions. Let them know it's okay to ask questions! Here is a basic way to explain an overdose death with a child:

*"Your dad died from an overdose. When someone has died that means that their body has stopped working. He took medicine that wasn't meant for him and that made his body stop working. Does that make sense?"*

Answer their questions as openly and honestly as possible. When children don't have their questions answered, they will come up with their own answers often much more scary than the truth. It is also important to remember that this isn't a one and done kind of conversation. As the child processes the information they will have additional questions and as they continue to grow the questions they have will begin to change. With smaller children, around 3-5 years old, they might ask the same questions again and again. You may have just explained that grandpa died and they seem to understand it but then an hour later they may ask when grandpa is coming over again. Be consistent and honest with your answers so they learn that the answer won't change and they can trust you to tell them the truth.

Due to development children will often believe that they did something to make someone else die. With that same magical thinking, they may believe that they are the reason that you are crying when you are grieving the death of someone you love. Children may want to "protect" you by not talking about that person. Reassure the child that it is not their fault that the person died. Be honest with children about your emotions and reassure them that if you are crying that they didn't make you cry, you are crying because you are sad and missing your special person. This helps them identify their emotions and appropriate ways to let those feelings out. We tell kids that there is no wrong feeling to *feel* but that there are good and bad ways to let those feelings out. Together come up with good ways to release their tough grief feelings.

Sometimes adults worry that telling a child the truth about the cause of a loved one's death might diminish the love the child felt toward that person. However, if we have honestly explained the facts of how they died to the child, we can easily and naturally move forward from there to the important task of honoring that person's life. **The meaning of one's life is never solely defined by the moment of his or her death.** Share good memories with the child and talk about things that you could do to honor the person's life. Children have wonderful ideas for how to honor life – explore them together!