

Guidelines for Parents

The following suggestion can be useful **when the final outcome of a crisis is unclear.**

- As soon as possible after the triggering event, set aside time to talk to your child. It is *very important* that you do this; your child may be hearing stories even if you are not aware of it, and it is best that disturbing news come from you.
- Give your child the facts simply. Don't go into too much detail. Children will ask questions as they come to mind and if they need to know more.
- If you can't answer certain questions, it's okay to say, "I don't know how to answer that, but perhaps we can find someone who can."
- Use the correct language. Say the words that apply – "missing," "kidnapped," "suspect."
- Ask questions. "What are you feeling?" "What have you heard from your friends?" "What do you think has happened?"
- Explain your feelings to your child, especially if you are crying. Give your child permission to cry, too. Parents are role models, and it's okay for children to see our sadness and to share in our feelings.
- It is okay to let your child know you are fearful, but be clear that you are acting to make them safer. Get ideas from your child on how you do this more effectively. Your child's thoughts can be valuable and can help overcome feelings of powerlessness. If your own feelings are overwhelming, and if you are feeling panic yourself, find someone who can help you. Try to avoid imparting this panic to your child.
- Keep the age and level of comprehension of your child in mind, and speak to that level.
- Talk about feelings: about being fearful, unsafe, sad, angry, depressed, scared, tearful.
- If you find your child whiny, clinging, or experience sleep disturbances, he or she may fear you or a friend will also disappear or be harmed. Feeling insecure and frightened, your child will need reassurance through touching and contact with you. Over time, this will help your child relax and become less fearful.

The following suggestions can be useful **when there has been a death.**

- As soon as possible, set time aside to talk to your child. Once again, it is best that information come from you and that it be factual, simple and honest, using the correct language, for example, "He has died" or, "She was killed."

- Ask if your child is hearing new words that need to be explained.
- Ask questions. “What are you feeling?” “What have you heard from your friends?” “What do you think happened?”
- Don’t hesitate to refer to the deceased by his or her name. The person may be dead, but he or she is a person to be remembered and loved, not spoken of only in hushed pronouns
- Read a book on a child’s response to death, such as *The Grieving Child* or *The Grieving Teen*, both by Helen Fitzgerald. Articles on the American Hospice Foundation web site www.americanhospice.org. Tell more about childhood grief.
- Talk about the funeral or memorial service. Explain what happens and find out if your child wants to attend.
- Think about ways your child can say goodbye to the deceased. This might be by attending the funeral or presenting flowers to the family, or by writing a note to the deceased that could be buried with the body.
- Depending on your religious views, you may want to talk to your child about your belief in life after death. But be careful not to say things like, “It was God’s will.” Statements like this raise more questions than they answer.
- Invite your child to come back to you if he or she has more questions or has heard disturbing rumors. Give assurance that you will answer any questions to which you know the answer or find the correct information when you don’t.
- Talk about memories – good ones and ones not-so-good.
- Watch out for bad dreams. Are they occurring often? Talking about them is a way to discharge stress.
- Friends, family, and schoolmates often find comfort in doing something in the name of the person who died, such as providing for a memorial of some kind.
- Sudden death, violent death, or death of a young person is especially hard to mourn. Disruption of sleep, appetite and daily activities are normal responses.

If you find your child is developing problems that you don’t know how to handle, don’t hesitate to seek professional help.