

## Ele's Place

### How to Explain Complicated Deaths to Children

- *Be as honest as possible.* Kids are perceptive and will pick up on adult cues or hear things at school, on TV, etc., so it is important not to avoid talking about what happened.
- *Keep it simple.* Giving too much information or too many details can be overwhelming and unnecessary. Kids will ask if they have more questions.
- *Layer information.* Tell children a little bit at a time. You can add more detail as they ask or if they seem ready for it.
- *Use concrete language to avoid confusion.* Often we want to soften the words, but abstract terms like “passed away” can be hard for kids to grasp, leading them to use their imagination and come up with their own meanings.
  - Ex. Say “He died” instead of “We lost him.” Kids may wonder if they can find their person, like a lost puppy.
  - Ex. Avoid saying, “He went to sleep.” Kids may wonder when he will wake up or might be afraid to go to sleep themselves.
- *Invite questions.* Young children often need information repeated and will ask the same questions over and over. In some cases, kids hear people talking at school or family gatherings and come home with more questions. Tell your child that it is okay for him/her to ask questions any time.
- *It is okay to say “I don’t know.”* Explain that sometimes it is really confusing and we don’t know why things like this happen. It is really hard to understand.
- *Reassure kids of their safety.* They may have questions: “Could this happen to me?” Assure your child that you are there for them and are doing everything you can to help keep them safe. You can talk about what you do to keep yourself and home safe (wear seatbelt, lock doors, etc.). Avoid lying or making false promises, but tell them if something they fear is very uncommon and doesn’t happen to most people. Acknowledging kids questions and normalizing their feelings is a way to help them feel safe.
- *Maintain routines.* Structure can help provide stability and minimize change.

**Explaining Mental Illness:**

- “Sometimes a person’s brain can get very sick and their thoughts get mixed up. They can’t think clearly. This may be what happened to Suzie’s mom.”
- “His mind was very sick, which made him very confused. We may never understand what went through his mind or what he was feeling, but he must have been in terrible pain.”

**Explaining Homicide:**

- “Sometimes things happen in life – terrible things that we have no control over. Well, a terrible thing has happened.”
- “Johnny died last week. That means that his body is no longer working and we will not be able to see him again.”
- “When someone dies it means that he or she can no longer breathe, see, hear, feel, or eat.”
- “People die in different ways, from cancer, in an accident, and sometimes, very rarely, someone is killed. That is what happened to Johnny.”
- “He died by homicide. Homicide is the act of killing someone else so that his or her body stops working.”
- “We aren’t exactly sure how it happened, but it is always sad when someone dies, no matter how it happens.”

**Explaining Suicide:**

- “He had a very serious illness in his brain. Just like people can die from cancer or a heart attack, they can die as a complication from an illness in their brain (called a mental or psychiatric illness).
- “She died by suicide. Suicide is when a person ends his own life or does something to make himself die.”

**Explaining Substance Abuse and Overdose:**

- There are good drugs/medicine and bad drugs/medicine. When a doctor prescribes medicine and you take the amount he/she tells you to, it is safe and can help you. If you take too much or if you take drugs that a doctor didn’t give you, it can hurt your body and even make it stop working. That’s what we think happened to Suzie’s mom.”