

Supporting Children and Young People bereaved by murder or manslaughter

This sheet offers information, guidance and suggestions of resources to help you support children and young people bereaved by murder or manslaughter. Included are messages from some of the young people we support at Child Bereavement UK (CBUK) who have been bereaved in this way.

Supporting a child or young person around the death of someone important to them is one of the hardest things for any adult to do. When the death was brought about by a murder or manslaughter, this adds yet more pain and trauma to what is already a devastating situation. The emotional impact of such a sudden, violent loss for all family members is enormous, but especially so for children.

Having to deal with the police, the coroner, lawyers and the media all add to the stress. The requirements of the criminal justice system can cause lengthy delays to rituals such as the funeral which may hinder or complicate grief and grieving. Trying to meet the needs of any children affected, while dealing with your own grief, confusion and exhaustion, is an enormous and challenging task. *“The court case makes you go through all the grieving all over again”*. A bereaved teenager.

What is different about this type of death for children and young people

Tom's view: *“I think it makes a lot more different because you know when they are ill why they died, when they got killed there was no reason to die”*. Every child is different and their response will be influenced by their age, any previous experiences of death, their relationship with the person who died and also with the accused. The expected reactions to a death by natural causes will still be there but intensified and amplified.

To a child, the world can now feel like a very unsafe place where the natural order of things is completely disrupted. This is how Alife told us he feels when walking down the street *“I feel quite worried because it might actually happen to you one day”*. Without a secure foundation to life, a child's emotional development and psychological health can be affected. They can become fearful of the future and see no point in investing time and commitment to any aspect of their lives.

With this type of death, children can be at significant risk of developing post traumatic stress disorder, particularly if they witnessed the crime or were involved in some way - for example having to call the emergency services. It is more likely that a child bereaved this way will need professional support in the immediate aftermath and the longer term. If reactions include disturbing and intrusive flashbacks, suddenly being startled, acute anxiety or anything which is preventing a child attending school or taking part in their usual routines, it is important to speak to your GP or seek other professional advice. The CBUK leaflet [“After the event – supporting children after a frightening event”](#) offers further guidance and practical help.

The death is also likely to be reported in the local or national news. There may be intrusion from the media or questions from people about what happened. For children, and often adults, this can feel intrusive and difficult to manage. Josiah said *“Media attention, phone calls just total anarchy, just everything.....people, phone calls, I just couldn't take it all”*.

When the perpetrator is known

When the person responsible for the killing is known to the child this can complicate responses and reaction. Government statistics state that 75% of victims aged under sixteen knew the main suspect. Family relationships may be adversely affected as everyone tries to deal with the resultant turmoil of confusing emotions.

A family member may be a suspect, but to a child they are still a parent, brother or sister. A child may continue to love them as part of their family, but mixed in with conflicting feelings of shock and horror at what has happened. Because of this family bond, a child may consider themselves responsible in some way for the death, or feel they could have, or should have, done something to prevent it. This sense of self-blame can create deep-seated feelings of guilt.

When one parent has killed another, in effect a child has lost both parents in a manner that is both sudden and shocking. The death may mean that a child has to move from their home and be looked after by relatives or someone they are not familiar with, or don't know at all. This can add to feelings of insecurity and confusion.

Telling a child or young person that someone has been killed.

Children can deal with the truth, no matter how difficult or traumatic. What they find hard are the untruths. When circumstances surrounding the death are particularly distressing, it may be tempting to withhold information. However, a death by murder or manslaughter tends to be picked up by the press and the local grapevine. The chances are that a child will overhear a conversation, or be told by someone at school. It is much better that they are told in a controlled way, in a safe place, by someone they trust.

How to break the news

A child is going to find what they hear difficult. In their helpful booklet "[Hope Beyond the Headlines](#)" Winston's Wish make some recommendations on ways to tell children that someone has died in these circumstances. The approach is one of a sandwich made up of difficult bits layered in-between anything that is reassuring or that might help the child to feel safe. Think carefully about the actual words you use. With young children try not use emotive language such as "stabbed" or "murdered." Saying "hurt" and "killed" still gets the message across but puts more focus on the death of someone important to the child, rather than the violent circumstances.

The words below in italics are not meant to be a script, more ideas to give you the confidence to go with what feels right for you and the child or children that you are with.

Start by explaining that someone has died. *Let's sit down together in the kitchen, I have something difficult I need to speak to you about. I am very sorry to have to tell you that Dad died last night.*

This may be all you need to say at this stage but if they have already picked up information from the media, you may need to say more. Overheard conversations, or use of social media, will speed up the need to know, particularly with adolescents and teenagers. If you suspect this is the case, check it out by asking what they think has happened; this will give you a clue as to how much they already know. It is important to correct any wrong facts.

Although Dad is dead he is not hurting. Dad was attacked by some people and they had a very big fight. The doctors tried their best to make him better but he was too badly hurt and he died.

When a child is ready to hear more, they will ask a question. Try to answer only the question asked with just enough information to enable the child to start to put together a story that makes some sense to them.

The people who attacked Dad had a knife and hurt him a lot. The police are working really hard to find whoever it was who did this.

More information should be given in stages, each stage being prompted by the child. Some children will pass through these stages faster than others. The timescale may be days, weeks or months, dependent on each child's readiness for further detail. Space and time will be needed to absorb the information, ask questions, or talk about how they are feeling should they want to.

For children, receiving this news will be no less of a shock than for an adult but ways in which they think about the victim, feel about the murder and express their grief will differ. For more guidance see the CBUK information sheet "[Explaining to young children that someone has died](#)".

Viewing the body

It is not unusual for a child to ask to see the person who has died. Children are naturally curious and provided they are well prepared, viewing a body can help them to understand what being dead means. Thinking through how to meet this request can be difficult and understandably adults may have reservations. Children sometimes choose to view a body to say goodbye and gain reassurance that it looks peaceful. This may not be achieved when the cause of death has resulted in damage to the body which could be distressing to witness, particularly for children. It needs to be thought through carefully. If a face is unrecognisable, it may be appropriate to view, or even touch, an undamaged part such as a hand. The body being covered up and only the hand exposed. However, there is a risk that the young person will ask to see the rest of the body and adults will need to think how they will answer this request. Again very careful preparation is essential. Providing a clear but sensitive explanation can help. *Because of the way your Dad died, his body is damaged and you might find that upsetting to look at but you can see or hold his hand if you would like to.* For more information see the CBUK information sheet [Viewing a body with a child](#) available on our website.

What might help

Try to be available to talk and answer questions. Children of all ages have told us that having time and space to acknowledge what has happened is something they need. *“I need space, space to breathe and acknowledge and accept what has happened”* Josiah. Children often worry about saying things that might upset people. This can make them reluctant to talk about what has happened or feel uncomfortable about asking questions. Reassure them that you will listen, without making judgements, about anything they feel they need to say. This makes it easier for them to approach you.

Explain the role of the media and the criminal justice system. It is likely that the death will be reported in the media and that children may have to speak to police or other professionals about what happened. It may help to explain that this occurs because what happened was wrong and people need to find out what happened in order to help make sure it doesn't happen to anybody else. *“A Children's Guide to Inquests at a Coroners Court”* www.norfolk.gov.uk/view/NCC110782 explains the procedure in simple language.

Rehearse managing difficult questions. Children can find it difficult to answer questions from others about what has happened. Work out together what they might choose to say in the face of difficult questions and practise beforehand. This will help them to feel more prepared.

Give lots of reassurance. For a child or young person who feels that they are somehow responsible for what happened, a clear, factual explanation provides solid evidence that nothing that they thought, did or said caused the death. Also emphasise that there was nothing they could have done to prevent it. Children can find this difficult to take in at first so you may need to repeat the reassurance so that over time they gradually come to believe you.

Children may also start to worry about themselves or others close to them being hurt. Although you cannot offer definite reassurance that this will not happen, it can be helpful to say something like *“there are some very bad people in this world but not many, most are good and kind”*. Being heavy users of social media, adolescents and teenagers are more aware of the realities of life, and much of what they hear about is skewed towards the bad. A death by murder or manslaughter reinforces the feeling that the world is a scary and dangerous place. Try to talk about anything positive concerning people or places familiar to them. This might help redress the balance.

Remembering the person who has died and saying goodbye. Because of the circumstances surrounding the death, the usual rituals that help people say goodbye to the person who has died may be delayed due to post mortems and criminal investigations. It may be helpful in the mean time to acknowledge the death in another way. You could think about laying flowers in a special place.

Not all family relationships are good ones and the bereaved child may have ambivalent feelings towards the person who died. It helps to paint a realistic picture, the good bits and bad bits, so that the child can grieve for the real person.

Try to give them a sense of control. The young people bereaved in this way tell us the sudden nature of the death and the disruption and uncertainty caused by the legal processes exacerbate a sense of powerlessness and lack of control. The criminal justice system will restrict what can and cannot happen but try as much as possible to involve a young person in any major decisions that will affect their lives. For example, involving them in planning the funeral or discussing with them different options for support rather than making a decision on their behalf.

Time to have fun. As with any death, it is important that children and young people feel able to continue with activities that they enjoy and give themselves permission to have fun. Don't be surprised if one minute younger children are very distressed but the next they are laughing and playing. Teenagers may appear to be totally focussed on their social life but in reality are using it to blot out difficult feelings.

Speaking to others. The young people we work with who have been bereaved by murder or manslaughter, say that support from peers who have been bereaved in the same way is vital. The shared experience creates an understanding and empathy they feel no one else can offer. To see films made by young people about their experiences visit www.childbereavementuk.org/Support/Youngpeople/Filmsbyyoungpeople

Look after yourself. In order to look after children at a time like this it is important to look after yourself. Seek support from people close to you including friends and family. Sometimes people can find it difficult to know how to help so letting them know what you need may help them to support you.

Resources

CBUK information sheets including:

[After the event – supporting children after a frightening event](#)

[Explaining to young children that someone has died](#)

[How children and young people grieve](#)

[Viewing a body with a child](#)

www.childbereavement.org.uk/Support/Youngpeople/Filmsbyyoungpeople

Short films and film clips made by bereaved young people including Messages From Young People Bereaved By Murder and Manslaughter.

[Child Bereavement UK](#) Support and Information Line 01494 568900. Confidential listening, support and guidance, signposting to other bereavement organisations in your area.

[SAMM](#) (Support After Murder and Manslaughter) www.samm.org.uk. SAMM is a national UK Charity supporting families bereaved by Murder and Manslaughter. Tel: 0845 8723440

[Hope Beyond the Headlines: Supporting a child bereaved through murder or manslaughter](#) by Winston's Wish. Offers support, guidance, and words to use when explaining to a child what has happened. This can be downloaded for free from www.winstonswish.org.uk.

[After a murder: A workbook for grieving kids](#) available from the Dougy Centre. Through the stories of other kids who have experienced a murder, this hands-on workbook allows children to see that they are not alone in their feelings and experiences.

A Children's Guide to Inquests at a Coroners Court

Short simple leaflet produced by Nelson's Journey download from www.norfolk.gov.uk/view/NCC110782