Breaking Bad News to Children – Information for Staff

**When** is the news to be broken? This needs to be as soon after the time of death as possible. Children will instinctively know more than their parents realise. They will sense that something traumatic has happened and not knowing what it is can leave them feeling frightened, anxious and insecure.

**Who** is going to break the news? It should be someone the child knows and trusts, preferably a parent - it is more important that it is someone who the child perceives as caring than someone who is knowledgeable. Parents may need some support to do this, either talking to a professional first about what words to use, and maybe even trying them out, or having a professional in the room when they talk to the child. Sometimes parents will ask staff to tell their child for them. Having two people means that if the child directs anger at whoever tells them of the death, there is someone else for the child to turn to.

**Where is the bad news to be broken?** Try to find a private place that is as quiet as possible and where you will not be interrupted as time is needed. A sign on the door can minimise intrusions. The child needs to be able to sit near you and have eye contact. It is preferable if it is a child-friendly space that has a less clinical appearance.

First of all check **what the child knows** or has assumed already about the current situation. If they witnessed the death they will need careful explanation as to what they saw and any misconceptions corrected. These children may need specialist support later on – children can feel as much grief as adults.

**Warn with a statement such as ‘I’m afraid I have to tell you something very sad’.** Simple **truthful words are best** e.g ‘died’ and ‘dead’. Do not be tempted to use euphemisms – these can lead to confusion and fear, for example if ‘gone to sleep’ is used. Explain that when people die, their bodies don’t work any more so although it looks as if they are asleep, they really are dead because when we are asleep our bodies work very well.

The child needs to be reassured that their parent(s) love them and that **the death was not their fault** in any way. If they do not understand what happened they may become fearful. Children who have been in this situation have said that what helps most is honest information, talking openly and lots of cuddles.

**Explain a bit at a time – not long explanations.** Children are helped when **information is repeated** more than once and the adult checks they have understood.
The way in which children react and understand will be influenced by their age, their life experience, their emotional maturity and their family’s cultural and spiritual beliefs. The following offers some broad guidance:

**Children under the age of 5**

- Find it difficult to grasp the permanence of death and will need help in understanding the person who has died will not be coming back
- Have limited understanding, which may lead to a possible lack of reaction when told about a death

**Children between the ages of 5 and 11**

- Begin to develop the understanding that death is permanent
- May have a preoccupation with the practicalities surrounding death, and may need to have the facts over and over again. This helps them feel safe, allows them to begin to process the information and builds trust in the adults around them.
- Have an increased awareness of their own mortality, which may give rise to fears for their own or other’s safety

**Adolescents**

- Understand that death is inevitable, universal and irreversible. Their reaction to a death may be complicated by the struggles of adolescence.
- May talk at length about death, but seldom to those closest to them in the family
- Often have their own strongly held views as to what is right or wrong and will challenge beliefs and explanations offered to them by others

If, in spite of support being available, neither the parent(s) nor another trusted adult are able to break the news to the child(ren), you may find yourself as a professional in this position. The following suggestions are offered to help you to do this in the best way possible:

- Ask the child **what they want to know** about what happened. Their questions will show you what they have understood from your words. Young boys seem to especially like to know all the facts. If they do not ask anything, encourage them to say back to you what they have heard. Be honest about what you do not know
- Encourage the child to show their feelings and say how they feel about the news you have given them. It will help the child if you can **say how you feel** and don’t try and hide your emotions – this will show the child that it is ok to show feelings. Children also prefer not to be protected from parents’ feelings and are confused if they feel very upset but their parent is not showing any grief. However, hugely overwhelming displays of emotion can leave children feeling worried. Parents need to be reassured that it is ok to show their feelings, and to reassure their child that they love them and they will not always feel so sad
Explain to the child that people’s reactions to such bad news vary quite normally and include: numbness, disbelief, anger, denial and guilt. It is especially important to make sure the child is reassured that they were not in any way responsible for what happened, and their thoughts or actions would not have brought this death about.

Do not praise the child for being brave as this may cause the child to think they cannot show their feelings when upset.

Ensure the child knows that everything possible was done for their mother/father/sibling.

Don’t be surprised if the child appears not to grieve and react to bad news or immediately starts talking or playing with something. They will find their own way to absorb the news and tend to alternate between showing awareness of the situation and appearing to be distracted by something else. Boys and girls often grieve in different ways.

Explain what will happen next including where the body will be, that they can visit again later and perhaps might like to bring some mementoes to leave with the body, being careful that it doesn’t sound like the dead person will be aware of what has been brought.

Children can ask difficult questions and you may not be able to satisfy all the questions at this moment, so be honest and say something like ‘we don’t know any more at the moment, but as soon as we do know we will tell you’. This will stop the child from feeling something is being deliberately kept from them.

When talking to the child again, check back what they have remembered you to have said previously to see what level of understanding they have. You may need to repeat something or explain it in different words before going on to anything new. Let the child’s parent(s) know that children are likely to need to go over and over the same ground in the coming weeks and months too. It is precisely because children don’t understand that we need to talk to and include them.