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TALKING TO CHILDREN AFTER SOMEONE HAS DIED

Most people worry about talking to children and young people after someone has died. It is normal to feel anxious about saying the wrong thing or being asked questions that are difficult to answer. As it is our natural instinct to want to protect children from anything that will hurt or upset them it is understandable that some people think that not talking to children about difficult things stops them feeling upset and worried.

We know, however, that from a very early age children can sense when something serious has happened and if not helped to understand what this is may well be left feeling frightened, confused and anxious. In order to make sense of what has happened children need information and explanations.

Here are some simple guidelines for talking to children:

- ✚ Children need to be told as soon as possible. Difficult news is best given by a member of the family. If it feels too difficult to do yourself try to be there with the child when someone else who the child knows well can break the news.
- ✚ Be honest. Children can deal with the truth even when it is difficult to hear. It can be very confusing for children if they are told something that they later find out was not entirely true. Children need to trust that you are being honest from the beginning.
- ✚ Use simple language that the child can understand. Depending on their age it is best to use words they already know and stick to simple concepts that they can understand.
- ✚ Don't feel that you have to tell children everything in one go. It is usually better for children to be given information in small chunks. More information can be added at a later date when the child is ready.
- ✚ It is important to use real words such as 'dead' or 'died'. This helps children begin to understand that the person is not coming back and helps them make sense of what has happened.
- ✚ Avoid using euphemisms such as 'lost' or 'gone to sleep'. This may seem a kinder way to talk about someone who has died but this can cause confusion or other worries to a child.
- ✚ Be prepared for repetition. Children may keep asking the same questions. Information will need to be repeated over a period of time and children may need to hear explanations again and again before they really understand.
- ✚ Ensure that all members of the family and others (including school staff) are talking about what has happened in the same way and using consistent language. Different explanations can cause additional confusion at a time when a child may be struggling to make sense of what has happened.
- ✚ Make sure that children understand what they have been told. Asking children what they think is a good way of checking what they have understood.
- ✚ Don't be afraid to say 'I don't know' if you have been asked questions that you cannot answer.
- ✚ Using age appropriate books can help with difficult conversations about death. You can find a list of age appropriate reading resources on our website.