Supporting children and young people bereaved by murder or manslaughter

In 2018, there were 726 deaths by homicide (murder or manslaughter) in the UK, an increase of 3% on the previous year. This sheet offers information and guidance to help you support children and young people bereaved in this way, including messages from some young people who have had this experience.

Supporting a child or young person around the death of someone important to them can be very hard. A murder or manslaughter adds yet more pain and distress 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.

Telling children and young people
With support, children can deal with the truth, no matter how difficult or shocking. What they find harder are untruths. With a natural instinct to protect children, it may be tempting to withhold information from them. However, a death by murder or manslaughter tends to be picked up by the press, the local community and social media. 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 safe place, by someone they are close to and who can support them on an ongoing basis.

The following is an approach you could adapt, and it can be done in stages, over different conversations:

Explaining that someone has died
"Let’s sit down together in the kitchen, I have something difficult I need to talk to you about. I am very sorry 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 other people or social media, you may need to say more. If you suspect they already know something, you can ask them what they think has happened. It is important to correct any wrong facts.

Giving simple details
A next step can be giving simple, factual details which the child or young person can picture. This helps them to shape the details into a story that they can understand and tell other people:

“Daddy died outside the train station”.
“Sonia died on a bus in France”.

Explaining how they died
It is best to be honest, but think carefully about the actual words you use. Try to alternate the difficult, truthful statements with words that will help a child to feel safe:

“Although Dad has died 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.”

“The people who attacked Marcus hurt him with a knife. The police are working really hard to find out who did this”.

With young children, avoid emotive words like “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. Try to say that “someone did a very bad thing” rather than “it was done by a very bad person” as a ‘Bad Man’ or ‘Bad Woman’ can become a frightening figure that can haunt a child’s thoughts.

Answering questions and children’s reactions

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

Further important information can be given in stages over future days, weeks or months, depending on when the child shows their need for further detail. They will need space and time to absorb the information, ask questions, or talk about how they are feeling if they want to.

See also our 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. Understandably, adults may be unsure about this, and want to think it through carefully. Children sometimes want to see a body to say goodbye and to be reassured that the person looks peaceful. This may not be possible if there is damage to the body which is distressing to see. It may be possible to view, or even touch, an undamaged part such as a hand, with the body covered so that only the hand is exposed.

It is important to think beforehand about what to do if the child asks to see the rest of the body. A clear but sensitive explanation can help, for example:

“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”.

See also our information sheet Viewing a body with a child.

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

The death makes no sense

“I think it [is] different because you know when they are ill why they died, when they got killed there was no reason to die”. Tom, a bereaved young person.

Their world may now feel unsafe

The world can now feel like a very unsafe place where the natural order of things is completely disrupted. This is how Alfie 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, children can become fearful of the future and may see no point in investing time and commitment to any part of their lives.

Exposure to the event itself

Children bereaved by murder or manslaughter can be at significant risk of developing post trauma symptoms, particularly if they witnessed the crime or were involved in some way; for example having to call the emergency services. Children may need professional support in the immediate aftermath and the longer term.

It is common for anyone who has experienced a frightening or disturbing event to have various reactions for a few weeks afterwards. These can include flashbacks (intrusive images of the event), suddenly being startled, being very anxious, and having difficulty concentrating. It can help to reassure them that these are normal reactions, that they are safe and that they may start to feel better soon.

However, if a child continues to have such problems several weeks or months later, or if their behaviour or emotional state is affecting everyday activities, their GP may be able to advise you on further support.

See also our information sheet Frightening events – supporting children and young people.
Media attention
The death is likely to be reported in the local or national news. There may be attention from the media or questions from people about what happened. For children, and adults, this can be intrusive and difficult to manage.

“Media attention, phone calls, just total anarchy, just everything…people, phone calls, I just couldn’t take it all”. Josiah, a bereaved young person.

An investigation
Having to deal with the police, the coroner, lawyers and the media all add to the stress, as does trying to shield children from this. The requirements of the criminal justice system can cause lengthy delays to rituals such as the funeral, and such delays may obstruct or complicate grieving.

“The court case makes you go through all the grieving all over again”. A bereaved teenager.

When the perpetrator is known
UK government statistics for 2017-2018 show that 53% of victims aged under sixteen knew the main suspect. 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 this is 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 done something to prevent it. Such 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. Family relationships may be affected as everyone tries to deal with the resulting turmoil of confused emotions.

What might help children and young people

“I needed space, space to breathe and acknowledge and accept what has happened”. Josiah.

- **Time to talk and answer questions.** Children often worry about saying things that might upset people, making them reluctant to talk about what has happened or to ask questions. Reassure them that you will listen, without making judgements, about anything they need to say.

- **Explain the role of the professionals involved.** The death is likely to be reported in the media and children in the family may have to speak to police or other professionals. You can explain that this can help the police to find out what happened and make sure it doesn’t happen to anybody else.

- **Practise answers to difficult questions.** Children need to find ways to face other people and what they might say, as you cannot always be with them. You can work out together what they might say if asked difficult questions and help them to practise their answers. This will help them to feel more prepared.

- **Give reassurance and simple facts.** This can help make it clear that nothing that the child thought, did or said caused the death, and 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 worry about themselves or others close to them being hurt. Although you cannot say this will definitely not happen, you can say something like:

“there are some people who do bad things to hurt people, but not many, most people are good and kind”.

If they regularly use social media, young people are more aware of the realities of life, and most media stories focus on dramatic or negative news. A death by murder or manslaughter reinforces the feeling that the world is a scary and dangerous place. Try to balance this for them by also focusing on anything positive concerning people or places familiar to them.
• **Remembering the person who has died and saying goodbye.** Rituals that help people say goodbye, such as a funeral, may be delayed due to medical and criminal investigations. In the meantime you can support children to acknowledge the death in another way. One idea is to lay flowers in a special place.

Not all family relationships are good ones and a child may have mixed feelings towards the person who died. If you are able to share both positive and some negative memories of the person, the child can grieve for the real person.

• **A sense of control.** The sudden nature of the death, and the disruption and uncertainty caused by the legal processes, can increase a sense of powerlessness and lack of control. As far as possible, try to involve a young person in important decisions that will affect their lives, for example, in planning the funeral or choosing different options for support.

• **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 young 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 they may be using it to blot out difficult feelings.

• **Contact with others.** Young people bereaved by murder or manslaughter have said that support from peers who have been bereaved in the same way is vital. The shared experience creates an understanding and empathy that they feel no one else can offer.

See our website section for young people for films made by young people about their experiences.

**Support for you as parent, carer or professional**

This is an enormously difficult time for the whole family. Meeting the needs of children alongside your own emotional or practical needs may be very difficult at times. Use whatever support is available to you, and feel welcome to call our confidential helpline on 0800 02 888 40 for further help and guidance.

**Resources and further reading**

**Child Bereavement UK information sheets**

- Frightening events – supporting children and young people
- Explaining to young children that someone has died
- How children and young people grieve
- Viewing a body with a child

**Books to read with a child**

Available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated.

**A terrible thing happened**

Margaret Holmes; illustrated by Cary Pillo

Picture book about Sherman, who is affected in all sorts of ways when he sees a terrible thing happen, but who feels better once he finds ways to express what happened. Suitable for early years and primary aged children.

**The huge bag of worries**

Virginia Ironside; illustrated by Frank Rodgers

Picture book about Jenny whose worries grow into a huge bag of worries that follows her everywhere. Jenny decides they will have to go. But who can help her? Suitable for primary aged children.

**The boy who built a wall around himself**

Ali Redford; illustrated by Kara Simpson

Boy built a wall to keep himself safe. Then someone kind bounced a ball, sang and painted on the other side of the wall and boy wonders if life on the other side might be better after all. Suitable for primary aged children.

**After a murder: A workbook for grieving kids**

The Dougy Centre

Through the stories of other children who have experienced a murder, this hands-on workbook allows primary aged children to see that they are not alone in their feelings and experiences.
An inquest for Mr Rabbit
Illustrated by Jan Barger. Small booklet explains the process of a coroner’s inquest in simple language. The story tells how Mr Rabbit died on holiday in France, and what happened afterwards. Suitable for primary aged children.
Available from Cruse Bereavement Care

Books for adults to help support children
Hope beyond the headlines: Supporting a child bereaved through murder or manslaughter
Winston’s Wish
Offers support, guidance, and words to use when explaining to a child what has happened.

Other organisations
Victim Support
www.victimsupport.org.uk
0808 1689 111
Provides support following a crime or traumatic event.

National Victims Association
www.victimsfirst.org.uk/
01642 984751
Provides support for families bereaved through murder or manslaughter.

SAMM (Support After Murder and Manslaughter)
UK charity supporting families bereaved by murder and manslaughter.
www.samm.org.uk
0845 8723440

The Coroner’s Court Support Service
https://coronerscourtssupportservice.org.uk/
Independent voluntary organisation whose trained volunteers offer emotional support and practical help to bereaved families, witnesses and others attending an inquest at a coroner’s court.