Explaining Murder or Manslaughter to Children and Young People

# Never Too Young to Know

Many adults still find it difficult to talk about death with children and it can be tempting to shield them from pain. However, it is important that children have a clear understanding (as far as their age allows) that the person has died. Even young children need an explanation about what has happened to someone who is important to them. The worst has already happened – nothing you can say can make it any worse.

It is also a natural reaction to want to spare the children from [learning](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/page.asp?section=00010001000200330004&pagetitle=Explaining+murder+or+manslaughter+to+children+and+young+people) how the death happened, by making up another explanation. However, the police and media will be involved and the story will quickly become public knowledge. Media interest, police visits and overheard conversations can all lead to children finding out the truth by accident or, indeed, hearing something that is not true. You will probably prefer that the children hear the news accurately and calmly from you rather than from rumour or from another child in the playground.

You will of course want to protect your children and to let them know they can trust you. If possible, a parent or carer is generally the best person to tell their children this difficult news. It will also give you a chance to reassure them that they are safe. If you are just not able to do this, then be with the children when someone else tells them. It may be that the child witnessed the death. In this situation, it is particularly important to talk clearly about what happened to acknowledge the truth of what they saw and heard. It is also necessary to reassure the child that the death was not their fault and there was nothing they could have done to prevent it.

# Finding the Right Words

Our experience shows that there may be stages involved in telling a child that someone has died as a result of violence. These stages may happen in the space of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months or even years. The pace between the stages is often led by the child’s needs and their ability to understand. This, in turn, is affected by their age and developmental understanding. The pace will also be affected by the situation, for example the possibility of your child finding out what has happened from other sources or from older members of the family. As we mentioned earlier, we recommend that a child is told by a parent, carer or close relative – or, at least, that they are present when someone else, for example the police family liaison officer, explains.

## The Stages May Be:

1. **Explaining that the person has died.**
2. **Giving simple details about the death.**
3. **Saying that the person died as a result of murder or manslaughter.**
4. **Providing a more detailed description of how the person died.**
5. **Explaining the process that will be followed – and what will happen next.**
6. **Talking about the person who committed the crime – or, if not known, what is being done to find them.**

This all takes time. It needs to be handled with care, giving children the chance to say how they are feeling. You may want to ask your child if they would like to know more details and then be guided by their response**. If a child says they do not want to hear more just now, they need to know that they can come back to you for more information. Then again, you may decide that your child cannot handle any more information at the moment. It is important then to let them know that you will tell them more another time – and then to do this.**

**If a child asks a question about what has happened, they are usually ready to hear the answer.** However, supportive adults may need to anticipate the questions and anxieties a child may have in their head and take responsibility for initiating these conversations.

A child may not ask a question, talk about the person, or express an emotion because they are concerned about upsetting you or other family members. Without these opportunities, however, their anxieties and emotions may come out in other ways, for example in behaviour, withdrawal or risk-taking.

# Stage 1 – Explaining That the Person Has Died

This is the stage when you explain gently and simply that someone has died…

“I have something really sad to tell you. Your Mother died today (or exact date...)”

**It is best to say ‘died’ rather than to use words such as ‘gone to sleep’, ‘passed away’ or ‘lost’ as these can be confusing to young children. Younger children may also not understand that death is permanent – that the person can’t come back to life.**

The very sudden nature of a death by murder or manslaughter can make the death hard to believe. One minute they were here, the next they were dead. You may need to explain several times to younger children that the person has died. This can be tiring and upsetting for you but younger children especially will need this repetition.

# Stage 2 – Giving Simple Details about the Death

This is an opportunity to explain in general how or where the person died. This allows you to tell part of the story honestly but without giving some of the details which you may feel could be too much at this time for younger children. However, it is important to check out with the child what they understand and to find out if they want more information. As mentioned, if a child asks a question, we believe they are usually ready and able to hear the answer. If they are not given information, they tend to fill in gaps themselves, often making 2 plus 2 add up to 17, which can lead to greater confusion and distress.

You can start by telling the story of how the person died with simple details…

“Daddy died on the corner outside the pub.”“Mum died in the kitchen.”“We don’t know exactly what happened, the police aretrying to find out. They think granddad was killed whensomeone tried to break into his house.”

# Stage 3 – Saying That the Person Died As A Result Of Murder or Manslaughter

This is the stage when you need to explain that the person was killed. There are many explanations because people and their situations are so different. It is really important – although extremely difficult – to separate the idea of a ‘bad event’ from the idea of a ‘bad person’. Children can be extremely frightened at the idea of a Bad Man or Bad Woman who kills people. This nightmare figure can loom very large over a child’s life. If at all possible, talk of a person who did a very Bad Thing. Of course, this is difficult when you are feeling angry and vengeful towards the person who killed but it will make it easier for children if you can try this approach.

Here are some ideas of what you might say; you will need to adapt one to fit your situation.

**General explanation**“I have something I need to explain about how your brother died. People die for lots of different reasons – like through illnesses or in accidents. Occasionally – and it really is very rare – one person does a terrible thing and kills someone else. This is what happened to your brother. Another man argued with him and killed him with a knife.”

**If the perpetrator is a stranger…**  
**“**It seems as if your cousin didn’t know the woman who killed him. So it is difficult to understand why she would do that. We may not understand until the trial and maybe not even then. Sometimes people do terrible things and no-one can really understand what must be going on in their minds to make them act in that way. Sadly, your sister came across a man like this who killed her. It could have been anyone but it was your sister.”

**If the perpetrator is someone known…**  
“The police believe that your mother was killed by the man she had been seeing recently. There seems to have been an argument and he lost his temper and used his strength to kill her.”

**If the perpetrator is a close relative…**  
“You know that mum and dad were not getting on. I know you saw mum sometimes when dad had hit her. This time dad lost it and killed her.”

**If the perpetrator is unknown…**“We know that your uncle was stabbed to death. What we don’t know is who did it. The police are going to do all they can to find out who did this. They will make surethat we are safe while they find out.”

**If the child’s life was threatened…**  
“We think that dad was so upset that he might not be able to see you both as much after mum and he had separated that he felt it would be better if everyone died. It is terrible that he felt that way and I find it difficult to understand how he could think of hurting you when he cared about you so much. You must have been very frightened. It’s not your fault. It is so sad that he wasn’t stopped before he had killed your mum.”

# Stage 4 – Providing a More Detailed Description of How the Person Died

This is the point when you need to explain what actually happened. This is probably the stage that people worry about the most but, if said gently, simply and factually, it can help a child piece everything together. While it is tempting to protect children from details, this will also involve protecting them from all media coverage, all overheard conversations and all playground chatter, which is clearly not possible. It is best if they learn what happened from people they trust. Talking about how someone died will open up more questions, although not always straight away. See this as a good thing – one question asked out loud is one less question inside the child’s head. It also shows that they trust you to tell them the truth.

Children will be concerned that the person who died was in pain before they died; there may be a strong argument, for younger children, in saying that the death was quick and painless. With older children who know more details, it is important to maintain their trust by being honest.

“The police know that she didn’t die until a few hours after she’d been stabbed. The doctors believe that the shock will have stopped her from feeling too much pain.”

Here are some simple explanations of how someone may have died.

**Stabbing**  
“He was stabbed with a knife in his chest. He lost a lot of blood which made his heart and brain stop working. He was taken to hospital but there was nothing they could do to save him.”

**Strangling   
“**She was squeezed tightly round the neck so that she could not breathe and that made her die.”

**Shooting**  
“He was shot with a gun. The police think they didn’t mean to kill him but he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Dad shot mum in the heart and then he shot himself in the head – both of them died immediately.”

**Smothering**  
“She had a pillow held over her face until she could not breathe and so she died.”

**Assault**  
“You know I agreed to tell you after the trial exactly what happened. Your grandpa was attacked by a group of people who punched and kicked him until he couldn’t breathe anymore and was too badly hurt to live.”

**Fire**  
“She could not get out because of the fire and the smoke made it impossible for her to breathe so she died.”

**Terrorism**“It seems as if some people deliberately placed that bomb where people would be killed – and sadly many people died, including dad. The blast caused such severe injuries that he died before anyone could help him.”

##### Other situations

*The previous explanations can be adapted to fit other situations.*

It is important to check what your child has understood. They should feel informed without feeling too frightened. Remember to take your time, explain in language that the children understand, and tell them when you don’t know something. Give them choices about how they would like you to share information with them as it becomes known to you (for example from the police, during the inquest, after the trial).

That’s a really good question. I don’t know the answer and maybe we’ll never know. If I find out more, would you like me to tell you?

# Stage 5 – Explaining the Process That Will Be Followed

This will depend, of course, on what has already happened. It will be helpful to the children to have some understanding of what will be happening and when (for example, when the family might be able to hold the funeral). The police family liaison officer will be able to talk to you about the stages of the investigation, including the likely timings. It may seem surprising and frustrating how long the process can take. Do your best to keep lines of communication open with your liaison officer.

Following a murder or manslaughter, the usual process involves the following steps.

* Someone who knew the person who died is asked to **identify the body**, if this is possible. This would be a separate process from the opportunity to view the body at a funeral home before a funeral.
* A **post-mortem** examination of the body (sometimes called an autopsy) shows for certain how the person died. Occasionally, more than one post-mortem may be conducted. It may be distressing to children (and adults) to think of the body of their loved one being further examined by strangers but it is a necessary part of the criminal investigation.
* There will be a close scientific study (sometimes called **forensic study**) of the place where they died to check for and possibly remove any evidence that may help prove who killed the person and how. This can seem especially intrusive when the location is  
  the children’s own home.
* **Interviews** are held with anyone who knew the person who died. This may include the children, particularly if they have witnessed any actions that led to the death. Specialist officers will usually do this questioning.
* An **inquest** – a legal enquiry into a death – will be held by a coroner to establish the basic facts about the death. If someone has already been charged with murder or manslaughter, the coroner will open the inquest, and then adjourn it until the criminal  
  proceedings are over. When the inquest has finished, there will be a written report; this can help people to feel that everything has been done to bring out the truth about the death.
* **Registering the death** can take place after the inquest has been held or adjourned.
* The **funeral** may have to be delayed while investigations continue. There may be difficulties if the family would like a cremation and additional complications if there are religious or cultural practices to be followed. Children may benefit from a short ceremony so they can say ‘goodbye’ to the person who has died if the funeral will be delayed for a long time.
* The continuing **police investigation** may or may not lead to an arrest and charge. This will continue to attract media interest and although the police will intend to inform you before informing the media, this does not always happen in practice. An arrest can be a great relief or may be the cause of an upsurge of strong feelings.
* **Trial, verdict and sentence** (if appropriate) will follow – with all the media interest that goes with it. This is likely to be a time when everyone’s feelings, including the children’s, become heightened and you are plunged back into those early days after the murder. The extent of the emotion will be influenced by whether or not you feel the outcome is just.
* There is the possibility of an **appeal** against the verdict.
* Some people may find that they are only able to grieve properly after they know the outcome of the trial. This may be the time for a **memorial service** to mark the life of the person who died.
* A future date when the perpetrator may be **released** may see a resurgence of strong feelings, particularly in children who are likely to be young adults by then. You may have contact with the Probation Service when the perpetrator moves from one prison to another or when they are about to be released.

# Stage 6 – Talking About the Person Who Committed the Crime

One of the most difficult topics will be to talk about the person who committed the crime. As discussed earlier, if at all possible it will be helpful to children to separate the idea of bad people and bad actions. You can use your strongest language for what happened – if that helps you.

If the person is not known to the family, it is reasonable to discuss why they might have done this. While there is never an excuse for violence, you may want to talk to children about the negative effects of drink or drugs, or the effects of having an unstable personality.

Children may need to know, and be reassured to learn, that someone has been charged and is in police custody.

If the person has still not been found, it is important to make sure that the child has a sense of safety and security in the world. It is not helpful for children to feel that ‘they could be out there anywhere’; they will feel more safe and secure if they know that the police will continue to search until the perpetrator is found and punished.

**When the perpetrator is known…**  
It is always more complicated when the perpetrator is a family member; in those cases the tangle of emotions and reactions can be overwhelming. If, for example, a child’s father kills a child’s mother, the child in effect suddenly and shockingly loses both parents. They may be very confused by the fact that they have loved both parents – and love for the killer doesn’t suddenly cease. The very person who could best comfort them after the death of one parent is the very person they may not be allowed to see.

“One part of me still loves dad when I think about the good times and the other part hates him for what he did to mum. He’s still my dad but I don’t know what to think about him.” Josie

Equally, they may feel as devastated by the actions of one parent as by the death of the other and have to struggle with an even more complex range of emotions. They may find themselves expected to visit the parent in prison or maintain contact in some other way. They need many opportunities to express these difficult feelings, rather than keeping them bottled up inside. They may need to be reassured that it is reasonable to keep caring about the living parent as well as the dead parent – without in any way accepting or condoning what has happened.

“I know she was defending herself against dad and I’m glad there won’t be any more fights. But I still miss dad. And I still love mum and worry about her in prison. But I can’t talk to her about what happened.” Matt

Children may also have feelings they find very hard to express – for example, they may feel guilt (however unjustified) – “Could I have stopped it happening?” Or they may be afraid of their own anger – “If I can’t control my anger now, am I going to be just like him when I get older?”

It can complicate things a lot if a child ends up being looked after by the relatives of either the victim or the killer – this can happen because they are the closest and most caring relatives to the child. These carers may continue to feel loyal to their relative and, therefore, the child may get a distorted version of what happened, especially at the time of the trial. This means it is really important that all members of the family try to communicate and work together in the best interests of the children.