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## TIPS TO PREPARE A CHILD FOR A LOVED ONE'S DEATH

Whether you know someone is dying or might die, it is helpful to provide children with opportunities to begin processing and understanding a possible death. While knowing that someone might die is not easier or harder than being surprised by a death, preparing a child is beneficial as they navigate this experience.

### 1 HONESTY

Telling a child someone is going to die starts with a commitment to honesty. Honesty is important. In order to be honest, enter the conversation without expectations about how they will react. Some kids may respond with fear while others may seem indifferent. No reaction is better or more appropriate than another.

### 2 FACTS MATTER

Facts help children process information. Facts are the tools a child uses to navigate a situation, explore, and make sense out of what's happening.<sup>1</sup>

### 3 ANTICIPATE

Don't anticipate their reactions because those are unpredictable. Instead, anticipate their needs and have a plan in place. Consider these common needs: safety, consistency, assurance of care, your love, etc.

### 4 FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Children digest information like their food: best in morsels. Start with one bit of information at a time, and answer their questions as they are asked.

### 5 BIOLOGY

Talk about death biologically. See our [tip sheet for teaching kids about death](#). Avoid clichés, metaphors, and abstract ideas. Kids are concrete thinkers and won't understand.

### 6 INVITE QUESTIONS

Encourage children to ask a lot of questions. Let them know they can ask questions whenever they have them. Many questions will come at unexpected times as they are processing.

### 7 ENCOURAGE EXPRESSION OF THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Children need to be free to think all of their thoughts and feel all of their feelings without judgment or criticism. There is no such thing as a "bad" thought or feeling. All thoughts and feelings should be considered a valid part of their processing. Leave your judgments and need to correct or teach at the door.

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### 8 NURTURE

Kids want to feel safe and cared for. Affection and nurturing<sup>2</sup> go a long way in creating a trusting environment that fosters healthy responses.

### 9 CREATE A PLAN

It's healthy for kids to have distractions balanced with processing the intensity of the situation. Consider having a play date set up, identify a place to go, or have a friend available in case these things are helpful to the child as s/he digests the news.

### 10 TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

While this is likely a very difficult conversation, do your best to create a safe space that normalizes a child's reactions and questions. Think about what your needs will be after the conversation. Maybe you'll need a friend to talk to, maybe you'll need a break. Make a plan for yourself and then pace yourself so that you can get through the conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Saltzman, W. R., Pynoos, R. S., Layne, C. M., Steinberg, A. M., & Aisenberg, E. (2001). Trauma-and grief-focused intervention for adolescents exposed to community violence: Results of a school-based screening and group treatment protocol. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 5(4), 291.

<sup>2</sup> Layne, C. M., Warren, J. S., Saltzman, W. R., Fulton, J., Steinberg, A. M., & Pynoos, R. S. (2006). Contextual influences on post-traumatic adjustment: Retraumatization and the roles of distressing reminders, secondary adversities, and revictimization. In Schein, L. A., Spitz, H. I., Burlingame, G. M., & Muskin, P. R., (Eds.), *Group Approaches for the Psychological Effects of Terrorist Disasters* (pp. 235-286). New York: Haworth.