



STARTING THE **CONVERSATION** ABOUT...

A SUBSTANCE-RELATED DEATH

CREATED BY THE **HIGHMARK CARING PLACE**

It's natural to want to protect children from difficult news, or to assume that they're too young to know or understand. While you never need to feel pressured to talk before you're ready, it is okay to tell children of any age truthful information about the cause of death. It's better for the truth to come from a trusted adult than from social media or from someone at school or in the community. Telling a child directly helps build a foundation of trust and safety with their adults while giving them an opportunity to ask questions. If you're struggling with how or if to have this conversation with your child, please reach out to discuss your child and family's specific needs, or for support in preparing for this difficult conversation.

The information below is intended to guide you with suggestions on ways to approach this conversation.

PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

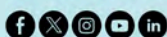
- Prepare yourself so you can have the conversation in a gentle and honest manner.
- While you may never feel completely ready, you can feel more prepared if you are not tired, hungry, rushed or emotionally exhausted. Consider your well-being first.
- Share the news in a comfortable, familiar environment.
- Have other adults present who the children are comfortable with, if possible, to support both them and you. These adults can assist in delivering the news if it becomes too difficult for you.
- Start by saying, "I have some very sad news about _____." or "We need to talk about _____."



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BY AGE GROUP

PRESCHOOL

“They died. ‘Died’ means their body stopped working.”
“They took a drug that made their body stop working.”
“They can’t come back.”

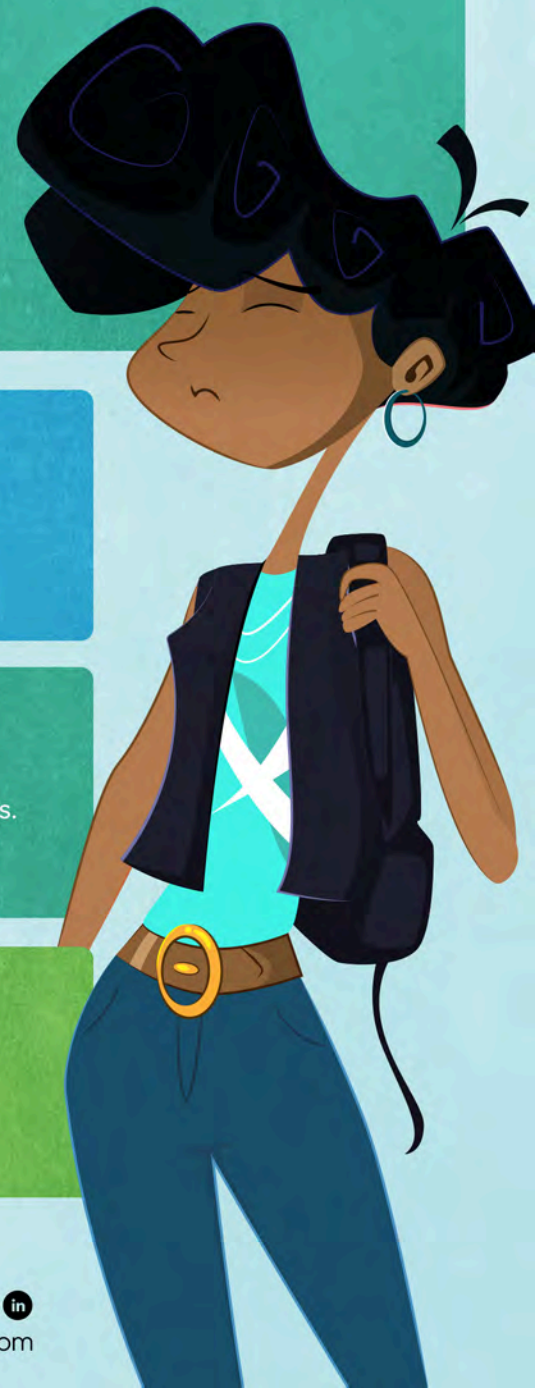


ELEMENTARY

“They took more of the medicine the doctor prescribed than was safe to use and it made their body stop working.”
“They took a drug (or drank a lot of alcohol) that they thought would make them feel better but it was more than their body could handle and they stopped breathing. This is called an overdose.”
“Do you know what addiction means? Do you have any questions?”

TEEN

“They overdosed on prescription medication/ drugs.”
“After drinking alcohol for a very long time, it harmed their body so much that it led to their death.”
“Do you have questions about addiction?”



HOW MUCH DO I TELL THEM?

- Use honest, direct language.
- Start by sharing that they died and the cause of death.
- Pause and ask the child if they have any questions.
- You don’t need to give them more information during this first conversation. This may be all the information your child needs or can process right now.

WHAT IS ADDICTION?

- Addiction is a disease that causes a person’s brain to want more and more of a medication or drug to feel okay/better/good.
- Addiction changes the brain, making it hard for the person to stop taking the drugs.
- Addiction can make a person behave in unpredictable, confusing, scary or hurtful ways.

WHAT ARE DRUGS?

- Remind kids that not all medications are addictive and dangerous.
- Explain that there is a difference between drugs of abuse and prescription medication.

KEEP IN MIND

- It's okay to pause and think about your answers before you respond. You can always return to a question when you feel more prepared to answer.
FOR EXAMPLE: "That's a really good question. I'd like to think about that before I answer."
- It's never too late to explain addiction.
- Children may have witnessed or experienced hurtful, unpredictable or frightening behavior, resulting in their feeling a sense of relief.
- Some family members might feel a combination of anger, relief, confusion, resentment, hurt and guilt. All of these feelings are natural responses.
- As children reach new developmental stages, their understanding will evolve and they will likely have additional questions or revisit questions you have already answered.

SUPPORTING THE CHILDREN

- Reassure the children that nothing they did or said caused this to happen.
- Provide opportunities for play, physical activity, and alone time as needed.
- Maintain routines and structure as much as possible.
- Answer questions truthfully, while addressing fears and validating feelings.
- Check in with your children periodically and ask them if they have questions about the death or about their person. Assure them you will get through this together.
- It's okay to talk about the person who died. That lets children know that you're open to them talking about the person with you.
- Engage school personnel (teachers, school counselors) to support the child and make a plan for points when the child is having a hard time at school.

RESOURCES

For more information on Addiction and on supporting grieving children, please visit the following resources:

- Highmark Caring Place – highmarkcaringplace.com
- Eluna – elunanetwork.org
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – samhsa.org
- National Alliance for Children's Grief – nacg.org
- The Dougy Center – dougy.org
- Betty Ford Foundation – hazeldenbettyford.org
- GraspHelp.org – graspHelp.org
- What's Your Grief – whatsyourgrief.com



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