

Tips for Talking with Children about Family Illness or Trauma

Tell the truth.

Children need to know what happened and where their family member is. You might want to protect them, but children often know that something has happened. Without information, children may feel more fearful and worried. Talk openly about the illness or hospitalization. This will help your child feel comfortable asking questions and sharing feelings.

Give information based on the child's age and maturity.

Younger children need more simple explanations. Older children may have questions and want more details. Let the child's questions guide what information you share.

Allow the children to ask questions.

Tell the children that no questions are silly or dumb. Answer your child's questions and worries honestly. Some children might need to be encouraged to ask questions. Other children will need updates. Just because a child is not asking questions does not mean he is not concerned. You might try using the following conversation starters.

- "Sometimes kids worry about ..."
- "I wonder what you think about..."

What if I don't know how to answer a question?

It is okay to not have all the answers. What is important is to let the children know that you think their question is important and you will help them find an answer.

- "That is a really good question. Let's think about who we can ask..."
- "That is a really good question. I'm going to ask the (doctor, nurse, or social worker) and let you know what they say."

What do children need to know?

It's not your fault.

Younger children and sometimes, older children may feel they did something to cause the illness or accident. Repeat this explanation often.

- "Nothing you thought, said or did caused this accident or illness to happen."

Who is going to take care of me?

Let the children know who will be taking care of them. Who is going to help them get to school? Who will be home in the evening to get them dinner and bedtime? Where are you going to be?

How can we help the children cope?

Talk about feelings.

Let the children talk about their feelings. They can feel sad, worried, frightened, angry or left out. Let them know their feelings can change from day today. Talking about feelings as a family can help.

Keep routines as normal as possible.

Make sure older children are continuing to go to school. If possible help them keep up their after school activities or sports. Younger children will need consistent bath and bedtime routines.

Create a support system for the children.

Call the child's school or day care provider and let them know what has happened. Teachers and school counselors can help support the child. Let the child know who you have told at school and that he can talk to the adults if he is upset.

Some thoughts about teenagers

Teens may want to be more independent and treated more like an adult.

- Encourage the teen to talk about her feelings. Teens might do this with friends or others.
- Help the teen maintain school and other activities.
- Do not rely on the teen to take on many new responsibilities during this time.

I've told the children but they do not seem upset.

Children tend to cope by dealing with what they can at the moment. It might seem strange that after you've shared the news that they might ask to play with their friends or watch television. They may become upset at another time.

- Let the child know that he can come to you if he feels upset.
- Find a time to check-in with each child to see how he is doing.

A word about distress

It is normal for children to be distressed when there has been an accident or illness in the family.

You might notice the child is having problems with:

- Nightmares or difficulty sleeping.
- Clinging, not wanting to leave you
- For younger children: toileting accidents, bedwetting and thumb sucking.
- Complaints of feeling ill (stomach aches or headaches)
- Acting out behaviors at school or at home
- Expressing feelings or worry, sadness, anger or irritability.

If you are worried about your child's distress, or if you feel things have not improved in a few weeks, your child might be telling you she needs help. Talk to your child's pediatrician or a clinical social worker to help you sort out how to help.

Where can I get more information or help?

Ask to speak to a clinical social worker. Or call 617-726-2640