

How to Talk about Trauma and Loss with Children

By: Lynda Savage, M.S., LMFT, LPC

Many adults remember a void as children when trouble and loss came to their family. Not being told important information, they now adopt a “tell the children everything” attitude. Telling children “everything” is sometimes nearly as difficult as the trauma. The answer to the balance of what to tell the children is to tell the truth without overloading the children with details or with your own shock and grief.

Good advice, but how do you know what is overload and what is just enough? The answer is you don't. It is your desire and effort to do a good job that is both felt by the hearer and appreciated. Adults often recount that they remember how kind a person was when sharing difficult things with them when they were children.

A four year-old was being told about her uncle's funeral: “They lowered his body into the ground...” The four year-old exclaimed, “Only his body...not his head?” An understanding and warm voice answered this four year-old's question, filling in the true details.

Children may need for you to kindly explain things many times over. The shock of hearing the first part of something difficult may shut down their ability to hear the second part of the sharing. This, among other things, is why they need to hear what happened over and over.

In the first few “tellings,” keep the information as essential and kind as possible. The very young will not necessarily absorb facts, yet they will absorb how you look and feel in the time with them. They will understand that something big has happened. Timely, brief, truthful and loving are ways to help each other in any difficult discussion, especially in the beginning.

Here are pointers to think about as you prepare to talk with your child:

- As you talk about trauma or loss, resist the urge to change your child's reaction. If it is a sad reaction, you may not want to feel or see it. Let it be what it is. Simply approach your talk with the purpose of being honest and understanding. Then your child will more likely feel cared for.
- Be aware of, and maybe work on, your capacity for a “pause response.” Stop yourself from interrupting and/or from planning a response before your child has a chance to absorb or express their thoughts and feelings.

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P.O. Box 1676, Appleton, WI 54912 (920) 720-8920

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