Strong Foundations
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATES INC

www.sfpgh.com
support@sfpgh.com

Strong Foundations has been embedded in the Mt Lebanon community, providing mental health support to children and families for over a decade. Our team is here to provide support to you as you navigate this tragedy and loss. This document is intended to provide parents with timely resources about how to talk to their children about what has happened. If you would like to talk more with one of our trained therapists, please reach out at the email above. We are here to help.

Key Points:

- Honest and developmentally appropriate explanations are better than not saying anything. Hearing an explanation from you is better than children interpreting snippets of content, the emotional tone of adult conversations, or rumors. The goal is to provide enough information, but not unnecessary details.
    - Use clear language. Avoid phrases such as "went to sleep," "went away," or "is in a better place." These can confuse children or create fears about sleep and separation.
- Provide information in small amounts, and watch your child for cues they may have all the information they can process at that moment. Only answer the question your child is asking. Parents sometimes have the tendency to say more than is needed.
- Hold space for all their feelings and questions. Explain that all feelings are OK, no question is bad, and that we can talk about anything they are thinking or feeling, now or in the future.
    - Allow repeated conversations. Children may ask the same questions repeatedly or seem uninterested initially and return to the topic days or weeks later.
- Emphasize that the children were not responsible. Children may wonder whether something they said or did contributed to what happened. Explicitly tell them that nothing a child did or failed to do caused these deaths.
- It is OK to show your own grief in manageable amounts to your child. Showing your healthy display of emotion can give permission for them to do the same. Tell them you have friends and support to help you process your emotions (i.e. so your child doesn't feel they have to worry about you), and you want to offer them the same support.

- Incorporate more opportunities for rest, play and connection in your family routine while you manage the stress of this event. Predictable routines help children manage stress.
- You may choose to talk to your child about ways to make a positive difference. For example, they may want to make a card, plant a flower in memory of the family, or contribute to a donation. Even small actions in the face of tragedy can reduce anxiety and help promote resilience.

Possible Parenting Scripts:

Preschool aged children:
How much you say to a preschool aged child depends on their age, verbal skills, and exposure to the event. We are including two possible scripts. Version 1 is most likely the most appropriate version.

Version 1:
“I want to talk to you about something very sad that happened to a family in our town. A daddy and his two children died yesterday. Lots of people feel sad and confused about this and you might hear grown ups talking about it. The most important thing to know is that you are safe, and you can ask me anything. Any feelings or thoughts you have about it are OK.”

Version 2:
“I want to talk to you about something very sad that has happened to a family in our town. A father and his two children died yesterday. The daddy hurt his children and himself.

This daddy had a problem in his brain. Sometimes when brains get very sick, they tell us something is a good idea even when it really isn’t. In this case, this daddy’s brain probably said it would be better for him and his children to be dead than alive.”

Stop here and let that information sink in. Model deep breathing, and incorporate some physical touch if that feels natural.

“You can ask me anything about what happened. You can feel sad, scared, confused or even angry. You can also play and have fun. All of those things are ok. I will always listen to you.”

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Young children often find it easier to express emotions through drawing or play. Encourage these activities for meaningful outlets for discussion, connection, and reassurance.

Children might wonder if this could happen in your family, or if you will die. You can respond with something like, “I understand why you might worry about something like that. It is very rare that parents and their children die at the same time. I am healthy, my brain is healthy, I will not hurt you or myself.”

Children might wonder if the kids did something wrong or made their daddy mad. “The children didn’t do anything wrong. This daddy was ill, he needed help. This was not the children’s fault.”

Preschool aged children do not understand the permanency of death. You may have to answer questions about if the children or daddy can come back. A simple and clear explanation is best. “No, they cannot come back. Their bodies stopped working.”

Elementary aged children:
Elementary aged children have more understanding of death, intentional actions, and mental health. They have more capacity to think through different scenarios and outcomes, so they may have more fears.

“I want to talk to you about something very sad that happened in our town yesterday. A father killed his two children and then himself. I want to explain it to you so that you get accurate information and don’t feel scared. We don’t know exactly why this daddy did this, but sometimes brains can get very sick and become convinced that dying is the best option. This sometimes happens when people are struggling with their mental health. They might be depressed, which is when people are very sad most of the time, and the depression sometimes says it is better to be dead. We know that isn’t true, and it’s not OK to hurt another person or ourselves.

It’s also important to know that not all people who feel sad hurt themselves or others. This daddy had an illness that was very hard for him to manage. It is very sad this happened.

You can ask me any questions you have. It’s normal to feel scared, sad, confused, or angry. You might also feel OK, and not very sad. Any reaction you have is OK. I’m here to listen to you, whenever you need me.”

Children might become confused about why a father would hurt his children. “I understand, this is confusing. We don’t know what led up to him doing this, but I have to assume he was very sad and didn’t think there was another solution. I imagine he did love his children, but his brain got mixed up and made a choice that wasn’t healthy.”

Could this happen in our family… “It is rare that something like this happens. It seems scary because it is happening to people we know, but it is a very unlikely event. We are also mentally healthy. If we noticed our mental health suffering, like if one of us were sad a lot, we would get help from doctors and therapists. It’s important that you tell me if you are ever feeling that way so I can help. I am not worried about this happening in our family. I am here to take good care of you and we are all safe.”

Helpful Links:

- Talking about suicide with children:
    - https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/talking_to_your_child_about_a_suicide_death_.pdf

    - https://healthcare.utah.edu/healthfeed/2022/09/how-talk-your-child-about-suicide-age-age-guide
- Talking about homicide:
    - https://www.kidsmatterinc.org/child-safety/when-kids-are-victims-of-crime/homicide-survivors/
- Quick script and how to help visual by age:
    - https://elunanetwork.org/assets/files/Tips_Postcard-pdf.pdf
- Description of children's responses to trauma and how to help:
    - https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//age_related_reactions_to_traumatic_events.pdf
- Resources for kids after a violent death:
    - https://www.dougy.org/resources/audience/kids?how=murder-violent-death&who=&type=&age=
- Helping children cope with trauma:
    - https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-after-a-traumatic-event/