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| **Explaining Murder to Children and Young People**  Guidance for Essex schools and Education Settings  **Essex Educational Psychology**  September 2024 |

# **Explaining a Murder to Children and Young People**

The following guidance has been created to support any school/setting community manage difficult conversations with those children and young people who may have been exposed to, or affected by, a loss of a loved one or community member through murder. This may be through losing a loved one directly, or hearing about it indirectly, through a situation which has affected their school community.

This information has been developed through the advice and guidance from [Winston’s Wish](https://www.winstonswish.org/about-us/), a charity that supports bereaved children, young people, their families, and the professionals who support them.

[**Guidance**](https://www.winstonswish.org/category/advice/) **and Advice**

Telling a child or young person that their mum, dad, brother or sister has died is difficult enough, let alone telling them their loved one has died as a result of murder. It can also be difficult to talk with a child or young person (CYP) who may have an awareness that a murder has taken place within their school/setting community.

**Be there to reassure your children**

You will, of course, want to protect children and young people and to let them know they can trust you.

For the CYP directly affected by the murder, it can be tempting to shield them from the details of a violent death; however, police and media involvement means that the details will quickly become public knowledge. It’s very likely that CYP will find out somehow – in the media, on social media, overheard conversations. You will probably prefer that they hear what happened from you rather than from rumours or from another child in the playground.

If at all possible, a parent or carer is the best person to tell their children this difficult news and about any further information that has been shared within the public domain after the initial traumatic event. This is because they are best placed to offer them the reassurance that they are safe.

It may be that a CYP directly affected, may have witnessed the death. In this situation, it is particularly important to talk clearly about what happened to acknowledge the truth of what they saw and heard. It is also necessary to reassure the child that the death was not their fault and there was nothing they could have done to prevent it.

For those CYP who may become aware of a murder that has taken place within their school community, they too may hear stories, rumours, and facts about the traumatic event on the playground or in class amongst their peers. This can also be very confusing, unsettling, and frightening for CYP and so it is also important that you acknowledge the situation if they ask. Again, wherever possible, a parent or carer is the best person to talk to their CYP about this difficult news as they can support them to feel reassured and safe. However sometimes they may ask members of staff and it can be helpful to answer and address questions in a sensitive and an age appropriate way. It can be particularly helpful for school(s)/setting(s) to have an agreed script (differentiated to ensure it covers all ages) for staff to use as a response with CYP.

**Give Honest, Factual and Age-appropriate Information**

It is natural to worry that talking about a sudden death can trigger emotions or make people feel worse. However, Winston’s Wish have learnt that ‘not talking about’ something as important as a loved one dying, is more like to increase anxiety and confusion. Giving children the facts so they can understand what has happened is important. In the absence of information children may make up, or overhear, inaccurate stories about what has happened, and this can often be more frightening than the truth.

Just as adults may feel the need to have information about what happened; when, where and why, so can young people and that is why it is important to listen to what a young person is asking and answer as openly and honestly as you feel able to. It can be hard to know what to say or to do, but just being there and available to listen can be enough. Children may have lots of questions which you can’t answer, but it can still be helpful for the child to ask them anyway.

Events surrounding murder can often become very confused. Facts may be changed to become more comfortable to live with – or to make them easier to explain to those directly affected by the murder. It may be, for example, that children have been previously unaware of a loved ones activities, which have since become public knowledge. It may seem like the worst possible time to talk about this but giving the children an honest explanation will help them make sense of what they are hearing and what is happening.

The information that you share should be age appropriate and factual. It is really important that CYP have a clear understanding (as far as their age allows) that the person has died. Even young children who become aware of a murder (directly or indirectly) need an explanation about what has happened to someone, because it can be very confusing and frightening, especially if this person is important to them or they knew them directly in some way e.g. pupil’s parent, sibling etc.

It can help even very young children to have a simple story that they can use to re-tell and slowly make sense of what has happened. Use words they understand. Always ask them what they think about what you have said to make sure that they have actually understood. For younger children, information in small chunks may be easier to understand. In addition, young children may not need to know the exact details of the how the person died when it first happens. It will be possible to return to this as the child’s understanding develops and they seek more information.

It is important as adults to avoid where possible, sharing unofficial information from different sources that you may hear within the school community about the murder. The best source to base your information on and use, are the facts you hear from a police press release being shared publicly. This will ensure that what you are hearing and sharing with your friends and family is factual. This can support the community as a whole and protect CYP becoming overwhelmed and confused when hearing layers of different information. This can risk further confusion that CYP are having to then try and make sense of. In turn, hearing different versions of an event can also lead to CYP finding it difficult to know which information they can trust and can run the risk of unintentionally creating further unease and potential distress for CYP.

It may be that those affected directly by the murder require or have been provided more information than other people. For them, the worst has already happened – nothing you can say can make it any worse. Therefore, sometimes more information for the CYP may be helpful in providing clarity and a clear narrative to help them to understand what has happened. This can then help the CYP begin to process what has happened.

You cannot always avoid additional information being shared by those directly affected by the murder, if they choose to confide and share information with their peers or trusted friends. However, parents and carers can think with their children generally about the impact of hearing and sharing information with others e.g. how to respond to a CYP that may say something that upsets them.

In addition, parents and carers can also intentionally teach or recap with their children, the social skills to help them manage a range of different social situations. For instance, who to go to if they hear information that worries them etc.

**Build up information in stages**

Winston’s Wish’s experience shows that there may be stages involved in telling a child that someone has died as a result of violence. These stages may happen in the space of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months or even years. The pace between the stages is often led by the child’s needs and their ability to understand. This, in turn, is affected by their age and developmental understanding. The pace will also be affected by the situation, for example, the possibility of your child finding out what has happened from other sources or from older members of the family.

The stages may be:

1. Explaining that the person has died
2. Giving simple details about the death
3. Saying that the person died as a result of murder
4. Providing a more detailed description of how the person died
5. Explaining the process that will be followed – and what will happen next
6. Talking about the person who committed the crime – or, if not known, what is being done to find them.

This all takes time. It needs to be handled with care, and it is vital to give the CYP a chance to say how they are feeling.

**Let them know it’s ok to ask questions**

You may want to ask your child/children if they would like to know more details and then be guided by their response. If a child says they do not want to hear more just now, they need to know that they can come back to you for more information. Then again, you may decide that your child/children cannot handle any more information at the moment. It is important then to let them know that you will tell them more another time – and then to do this.

If a child asks a question about what has happened, they are usually ready to hear the answer. However, supportive adults may need to anticipate the questions and anxieties a child may have in their head and take responsibility for initiating these conversations.

A child may not ask a question, or talk about the person, or express an emotion because they are concerned about upsetting you or other family members. Without these opportunities, however, their anxieties and emotions may come out in other ways, for example in behaviour, withdrawal or risk-taking.

**How to answer difficult questions about a bereavement**

Children and young people will often have lots of questions after the death of somebody close to them. Sometimes, those questions are difficult to answer. How do you answer those questions?

Below is a video of how you can discuss these situations and how you can answer the difficult questions from bereaved children and young people.

[How to answer difficult questions about a bereavement | Winston's Wish - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh8WHeEEhVE&t=4s)

**Possible Scripts**

Responding to question with factual, age-appropriate information:

* “Thank you for coming to me with this information/question. We know that … happened. I wonder how you feel about that? I wonder if you have anymore questions?
* “Thank you for coming to me with this information/question. That is not something I know to be true. We know that … happened. I wonder how you feel about that? I wonder if you have anymore questions?
* “I can’t answer that question but I wonder how it has made you feel hearing that” Validate the feelings of the CYP. “It’s okay to feel …”

Being curious with a CYP who may have shared something or seem affected by what they have heard:

* “I wonder …”
* “I imagine it might have been difficult to hear … I’m wondering how it’s made you feel?”
* “I’ve noticed that … e.g. some of you have been talking about …/some of you seem worried about…” Offer an adult agreed planned response such as. “… is not something that we know to be true. What we do know is … (age appropriate factual information)”,

or divert conversation sensitively, until it can be addressed at a more appropriate time e.g.

“This is something that I would really like to speak with you about because I can see/hear there is confusion/concern/upset/worry. We can’t discuss it now because… but we will talk about it … (identify time – where possible on the same day)”

*(This can provide staff with some thinking space to form what they want to say, or enable them to get advice before addressing the situation).*

* “I wonder if it’s really difficult not knowing for sure whether/if … is true or not”,

**Responding to information that is not factual or incorrect:**

* “This information is incorrect/hasn’t been confirmed”
* “That’s not something I know about, but I’m wondering how it has made you feel?”
* A response to a child/young person who may have shared something their parent/carer etc has shared with them. “You may have heard that, however this is not something that we know to be true”

**Reassuring CYP about what they hear or how it has made them feel:**

* “If you hear something like that again, you can let me or … know”
* “If you feel worried about what you hear/have heard, you can let me or … know”

**Teaching about loss and bereavement in schools**

On average, 1 in every 29 children will be bereaved of a parent, that’s the equivalent of one in every class, and many more children will experience the death of another family member or friend. It is something that impacts us all, yet for many people, death is not something that is often talked about. Therefore, it is important to provide the opportunity to learn about bereavement in PSHE lessons and to support children and young people to develop the skills and understanding they need to deal with this particular life event. The resources for lessons on loss (created for Key Stages 1-4) have been developed by teachers and bereavement experts and awarded the Quality Mark by the PSHE Association.

**PSHE lessons on loss and bereavement**

Winston’s Wish provide free PSHE lessons on loss for Key Stages 1-4 which have been developed by teachers and bereavement experts and awarded the Quality Mark by the PSHE Association

* [Free PSHE lessons on loss and bereavement | School resources | Winston's Wish (winstonswish.org)](https://www.winstonswish.org/pshe-lessons/)
* [Activities for bereaved children and young people | Download for free | Winston's Wish (winstonswish.org)](https://www.winstonswish.org/activities/)

**Where to get support**

The Winston’s Wish Freephone National Helpline is available if you need advice on supporting a child bereaved by murder, you can call on 08088 020 021 (9.00am-5.00pm, Monday-Friday)

Email: [ask@winstonswish.org](mailto:ask@winstonswish.org) or use the [online chat](https://www.winstonswish.org/online-chat/).

The Winston’s Wish [Crisis Messenger](https://www.winstonswish.org/crisis-messenger/) is available 24/7 for urgent support in a crisis. Text WW to 85258.

For full details of the latest advice from Winston’s Wish can be found via the following link: [Explaining murder to children and young people | Winston's Wish (winstonswish.org)](https://www.winstonswish.org/explaining-homicide-children-young-people/) (Advice July 2020).

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