

**How to Have Difficult Conversations:
Advice for Talking to Children and Adolescents About Traumatic Events**

Adults play an essential role in supporting children. After a tragedy, it's common to feel at a loss for what to say. The list below offers some phrases to avoid and suggestions for helpful alternatives.

Pay attention to your own feelings.

- Avoiding your personal feelings can make it more difficult to speak your child.
- Be mindful of how your stress can affect your child.

Be honest and direct when sharing information about the incident.

- Make sure you are informed about facts of the incident.
- Provide honest, accurate and brief responses.
- Stick to the facts currently available. Be prepared to respond, "I don't know."
- Use concrete language and avoid euphemisms.
- Provide reassurance that they're safe.

Think about your child's trauma background.

- Children who've experienced past traumas may feel especially vulnerable at this time.

Address children's questions, worries or misconceptions

- Check in with your child to explore how they're doing. Give them space to ask questions and encourage communication.
- Listen attentively, respond compassionately, and provide reassurance.
- If your child's worries or fears don't go away or begin to interfere with their day-to-day life, seek out additional supports.

Support your child's feelings.

- There is no wrong or right way to react to traumatic experiences. You can help your child by letting them know that all of their thoughts and feelings are okay.
- Encourage your child to share their favorite memories of their peer (e.g., write letters, draw pictures, make a commemorative space).

Choose phrases and questions that encourage children to express their feelings.

- The list below offers some phrases to avoid and suggestions for helpful alternatives.

Avoid		Alternative
Saying nothing. When adults avoid talking about a traumatic event, it can send the message that it's an off-limits topic.	Instead try	"I want you to know how much I care about you." Children feel supported when adults evidence their care and concern through words and actions.
"Don't be sad." It's painful to see children sad, but these feelings are a normal part of the process. Allowing children to have space for their own emotional expression is key.	Instead try	"I heard the difficult news. How are you doing today?" Through gentle inquiries like this, adults make the child the priority.

<p>“I know exactly how you feel.” Trauma affects everyone differently. It’s impossible to know exactly how another person is grieving. It’s helpful to offer support that focuses on how the child is doing.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>“What has this been like for you?” Asking open-ended questions gives children the space to discuss their own grief experience.</p>
<p>“You must feel ____.” Instead of labeling emotions for the child, help them identify their own emotions.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>“How are you feeling?” This allows children to define their emotional experience.</p>
<p>“At least he is in a better place.” These statements tend to minimize the child’s loss. Children may feel limited in how they can respond to statements like these.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>“Are there questions or concerns that you have?” Children may not have a space where they can voice their questions or concerns. Checking in with them can offer a source of support.</p>
<p>“You should remember all of the positives in your life.” Adults often try to offer children an optimistic way to view their situation, but these well-intentioned statements may limit children from expressing how they are truly feeling.</p>	<p>Instead try</p>	<p>“Would you like to tell me some of your favorite memories of ____?” This can help the child feel connected to their deceased loved one.</p>

Note. Adapted from: The Good Grief Program at Boston Medical Center

Additional Resources:

[Children’s Bereavement Center](#) – Tips for Talking with Children about Loss