Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Advice on speaking with a child when a loved one is in hospital or has died

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Advice on Speaking with a Child When a Loved One is in Hospital or Has Died

Patient / Guardian / Carer Information

Bereavement Services

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Introduction

If you are reading this, then the chances are that you are an important person in a child's life and you are about to try and explain to them that someone they love and perhaps who cares for them is very poorly in the hospital or that they have died. This is not an easy task and sometimes you too may need a little help to do this. You may be a parent, a grandparent or other significant member and you too may be struggling with your own emotions surrounding the situation. You may worry that you will cry in front of the child or you may not be able to "get your words out", or that you will even make things worse for the child – don't worry, you will not. It is important that children see you crying, worried and upset because this encourages them to be upset too and they understand that it is ok to cry and be sad.

Children know when adults aren't being truthful so it is important to try and be as truthful as you can with them. Often children know when something is wrong, because there are more visitors to the house than usual, there are more telephone calls, and children are asked to go upstairs or leave the room whilst you deal with what is happening. Children may hear some of these conversations, even if you may think they haven't noticed and sometimes they try to put the bits of the puzzle together themselves – sometimes they get it right and sometimes they don't. That is why it is important to be as truthful as you can with them. If all the important people in the child's life can have the same story about why someone is very poorly or has died, this will support them in trusting you.

Firstly, ask them what they understand has happened to their loved one – they may get it right but they may also get it wrong.

Try and answer their questions as honestly and truthfully as possible, but be child friendly – don't talk to them about medical terms which they won't understand.

Keep explanations simple like "mummy had an operation on her head and the doctors and nurses are trying to make her better " or " Daddy was really poorly and the Doctors and Nurses tried to make him better but the couldn't and Daddy sadly died".

It is important that children are included as much as possible. Get them to draw a picture or write a letter to take into hospital / the Funeral Directors

Encourage them to look at photographs of themselves with their loved one or you could play recordings of their voice.

They could choose a favourite teddy to keep their loved one company whilst they are in hospital or at the funeral home.

You may need to let school or nursery know, so the child can access any support from teachers and staff.

If you feel that you really are unable to talk to a child then don't worry – you could ask a nurse to help you – what is important is that the child feels supported, loved and cared for whilst their loved one is in hospital.

Useful websites

Childline www.childline.org.uk

Winstons Wish - https://winstonswish.org/

www.psych.ox.ac.uk/research/covid_comms_support

www.psych.ox.ac.uk/research/covid_comms_support/healthcare-professionals/families

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