

## How to Talk about Death from Addiction or Overdose

Before you begin the conversation, consider the child's prior knowledge of family member's substance use. They might realize that person had problems and/or been exposed to upheaval and change caused by the addiction. Other children may not be aware that their family member struggled with drug-related issues. Either way, it can be difficult for children to understand.

Ground yourself before speaking with a child. Choose a calm and private place.

### Talking about Addiction

Many but not all people who die from drug-related deaths have struggled with addiction. If a person has struggled before an overdose death or if the person dies from conditions related to their addiction, the following can be helpful in explaining addiction:

- Distinguish between drugs of abuse and medicine used properly prescribed by a doctor. You might say "Addiction is a disease that causes a person to use more alcohol and drugs than is safe. It can be treated, but sometimes ends in death."
- Addiction can control the brain and cause the person to do or say hurtful things that they do not really mean.
- Tell the truth in an age appropriate way. You can add more information over time as the child can understand and process in a more mature way.
- Talk to older children and teens about the predisposition in families related to addiction. Talk openly and honestly, so that they can use this information when making decisions about alcohol and drug use. Learn more about how to break the cycle of addiction.
- Resist the urge to vilify the person who died. If the child thinks "Daddy was weak and bad then since I came from him I may be too." The way a person dies should not define their whole life.
- Children may have many conflicting feelings about the person who died. Reassure them that it is okay to have all kinds of feelings. They may feel protective and loyal, but also feel disappointed, hurt, and/or angry.
- The following "Seven Cs of Addiction" by the National Association for Children of Alcoholics," may be helpful way to discuss addiction.
  1. I did not cause it.
  2. I can't cure it.
  3. I can't control it.
  4. I can care for myself:
    5. By communicating my feelings,
    6. By making healthy choices, and
    7. By celebrating myself.



### Talking about Overdose Death

- You can start with asking the child or teen what they know and what they think about the death. This will give you a starting point for the conversation.
- Explain overdose deaths truthfully in age appropriate terms. You may say, “An overdose is when someone takes too much of the wrong drug or too much of a drug and their body stops working.” It may be tempting to hide the truth or make up vague stories. Children and especially teens sense when they are not told the truth. They may also hear it from others. This can lead to feelings of betrayal and distrust. It is best they hear it in the beginning from a trusted adult.
- Children as well as adults may experience feelings of anger, shame, and guilt. Reassure them that it is normal to have these feelings.
- Avoid assigning blame and reassure children it is not their fault.
- Help children learn to answer questions about the death if asked. You may give them useful language to use with their peers or to say that they would rather not answer.