



Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for the Media



What should the media know about covering traumatic deaths for children and families?

Traumatic events can take many forms and may result in the death of various individuals. The news media have a tremendous responsibility when reporting these events. They can provide a service to children and families when helping them understand difficult situations where others have died and how to cope in the aftermath. They also have an opportunity to be especially sensitive to the needs and concerns of grieving children who directly experienced the event. Viewing media coverage of traumatic events increases children's risk of developing Posttraumatic Stress reactions. Additionally, recounting details of a death they witnessed or the death of a significant person can be harmful to children.

This information sheet can help members of the media be more informed about the impact of traumatic deaths on children, the potential consequences of repeated exposure to media coverage of the deaths, and children's participation in interviews.

1 What is Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Individuals with Childhood Traumatic Grief have traumatic stress reactions which interfere with their ability to adjust to the death. Positive thoughts and memories of the person may remind children of the traumatic way the person died. These children get "stuck" on the traumatic aspects of the death and cannot successfully grieve. Children with Traumatic Grief may have upsetting memories about the death, or uncomfortable physical reactions. To minimize the distress, they try to avoid even positive memories, talking or thinking about the person or way the person died, or other people, places, or things that trigger upsetting thoughts and feelings.

Most children successfully adjust to the death of a family member, friend, or other important person. A smaller number will develop Childhood Traumatic Grief, which can occur following a death from a sudden, unexpected cause, homicide or suicide, mass shooting, disaster, accident, or an unexpected medical condition such as a heart attack. However, children can also develop symptoms of Childhood Traumatic Grief when death was due to natural causes, advanced age, or a terminal illness such as cancer, especially if the child was surprised or scared by the death or witnessed complex or frightening medical procedures.

- Provide ongoing warnings about the graphic nature of media content, with specific announcements explaining the potential negative effects on children.
- Limit the size, placement, quantity, and repetition of graphic illustrations and descriptions of those who died.
- Only provide pictures of deaths when they are relevant to the story; do not provide these as background.
- Limit the amount and type of news coverage during children's viewing hours and what is accessible to children on internet sites.
- Avoid promoting news of traumatic deaths with dramatic leads or front-page graphic images.
- Understand that in the immediate aftermath of traumatic death exposure, individuals often have impaired ability to make decisions.
- Even if traumatized children want to tell their story, it is not in their best interest to be interviewed by the media; interviewing can exacerbate children's trauma exposure and subsequent trauma reactions.
- Avoid soliciting eye witness accounts from those who are openly distressed or grieving, or from those appearing in shock or numb from the experience
- Respect children's rights and need for privacy.
- Understand that preteen children are not appropriate candidates for interviews because they may misinterpret or not understand events.
- Obtain parental consent for any live or taped interview with teens and refrain from interviewing anyone younger about traumatic deaths.
- Have a parent and/or mental health professional present when interviewing a teen.
- Inform individuals ahead of time when publishing reports about a death that include them.
- Understand the impact of anniversary reporting and the potential for children to re-experience the traumatic event and trigger CTG reactions.
- Seek consultation from a qualified trauma expert (www.nctsn.org) when you have questions about the impact of media coverage on children who have experienced trauma.

- Avoid sensationalizing the event with unconfirmed reports or speculation from untrained professionals.
- Seek out an established spokesperson, such as a school principal, who is involved in the event and in a position to provide accurate information about the death or deceased.
- Understand that dramatic or repeated coverage of particular events and technical details can lead to the spread of traumatic responses, copycat behavior, and increased CTG reactions.
- Refrain from glorifying the death or the perpetrator. Focus on the story and not on the individual committing the act or the methods used. Keep the perpetrator anonymous if feasible.
- Describe efforts to prevent future deaths and report on safety measures that are in place.
- Put the event in perspective by explaining the unlikelihood of the recurrence of similar deaths.
- Provide stories of hope, positive aspects of the story, and progress in managing grief.
- Encourage parents to limit access to news by older children and prevent access by very young children.
- If children watch media coverage of tragic deaths, encourage their parents to watch with them and to use it as an opportunity to talk with their children about what they see and hear.
- Seek assistance on coping with your own reactions to the traumatic deaths (<https://dartcenter.org>)
- Provide media reports with helpful information about signs of trauma reactions and Childhood Traumatic Grief (www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief), and mental health resources in the community.
- Provide information on what children and families can do to help others who are grieving.
- Encourage parents to seek help when they feel overwhelmed or need answers.
- Limit replaying of original images on anniversaries. If coverage is necessary, report on stories of hope, helping, survival, and healing.
- Provide accurate information about evidence-based treatments; (<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/traumatic-grief/interventions>)

Where can you find additional information and help?

Additional information for children, parents, professionals, pediatricians, and educators is available at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org with materials specific to Traumatic Grief.

If you have further questions or would like to talk with a professional trauma expert about the potential impact of trauma coverage on children, additional information is available from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at (310) 235-2633 and (919) 682-1552.