

BREAKING BAD NEWS to children and teens

If you have bad news to tell your children, how do you break it to them gently?

Here are some tips:

- Never avoid an issue for so long that your kids might hear bad news from somebody else first.
- Anticipate that there may be awkward questions and be ready to answer them if you can. Perhaps think these answers through with someone else first.
- Choose a quiet place where they'll feel safe and you won't be interrupted.
 - Perhaps have favourite things nearby, especially for younger children. E.g. comfort toys.
- Turn off cell phone and take the phone off the hook!
- Be honest with them. Stick to making statements you believe yourself. Keep explanations simple. If you don't know or cannot explain something, admit that you don't know.
- Use words they understand. Be honest and avoid saying things in such a way that the young person might be left confused about what you're really saying.
- Children do best with bite size information than can chew on.
- Don't talk for too long. Tell the children what they need to know, give them a chance to ask a few questions.
- Reassure them they can talk to you or ask you questions about it when ever they need to. Make sure you honour this with attention and answers when they do.
- Anticipate that they might want to then ask unrelated questions or begin a play or distraction activity. Do not assume they haven't heard you or are not reacting.
- Repeat key information at different times.

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- Along with the bad news, reassure. Repeat reassurances regularly.
- Be prepared to offer extra hugs and attention if your children seem at all upset. Touch can really help. Make eye contact often. This can be very reassuring.
- Don't push it. Having told the children whatever it is you need to tell them, wait for them to come back to you when they are ready to hear more or just look out for those little moments when it seems right to chat about it together again.
- Remain as calm and loving as possible. If a particular issue upsets you too, that's okay. It's good for kids to learn that all of us have different sorts of reactions when tough things happen. If it becomes overwhelming for you, just take some time out to regain some emotional balance and talk some more later.
- Look for kids books that cover similar issues.

A FEW MORE THOUGHTS...

Communicating bad news is something universally agreed to be difficult. There are personal, professional and social reasons why this may be so.

The following list (page 57 "Communication in Medicine" M. Lloyd, R.Bor. Churchill Livingstone 1996.) explores some reasons for this difficulty:

- the 'messenger' may feel responsible and fears being blamed
- not knowing how best to do it
- possible inhibition because of personal experience of loss
- fear of the person's emotional reaction - fear of upsetting the person
- reluctance to change the existing relationship you have
- fear of the implications for the person, e.g. loss, pain, distress etc
- uncertainty as to what may happen next and not having the answers to some questions
- lack of clarity about one's own role as the situation develops

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- possible not knowing the person, their background, social support, resources and limitations, spiritual beliefs etc. Many of us are often tempted to 'lessen the load' and resort to euphemisms and half-truths. This is often just self-delusion with the person being spoken to actually being aware of the situation, but receiving no support as the truth is suppressed. Some useful questions to ask if you are ever thinking about withholding the truth from a person is:
 - Who am I doing this for? Is it the person who doesn't want to know or can't handle the news?
 - Or is it me who can't bear to tell the truth and deal with the consequences for that person, or for me? Handling sensitive subjects requires:
 - time and an appropriate setting
 - honesty
 - real listening, active listening
 - empathy and caring support
 - being prepared to admit that you don't know the answers to some questions, or to find out and get back to them if you can.
 - an understanding that the person will respond in their own, unique way and to allow time and space for this.

WHAT DOES A GRIEVING CHILD OR TEEN NEED THE MOST?

- to have their loss and grief acknowledged
- to be safe and cared for – and to know this
- to have their own grief and coping style respected
- to be able to express thoughts and feelings in the ways they need to
- to be given regular reassurance
- to have people around them who genuinely care - and who show it
- to be given information about what's happening, in manageable amounts
- to have key information repeated
- to be involved in decisions, and events, where possible
- to have caring adults around who will listen, if they want to talk
- to have caring adults around who will answer any questions they may have with honesty
- to be supported to learn, and to make meaning, from their experience of loss
- to have people around them who will support their grief journey into the weeks, months and years ahead - and who don't forget their loss and its importance to them, their development and their future
- to be given some extra help if things have got too difficult for them to manage
- to be given hope and encouragement