



Linda Knoblauch
Community Development Coordinator
City of St. Albert Family & Community Support Services
201, 8 Perron Street St. Albert, AB T8N 1E4
Phone 780-459-1720 Fax 780-458-1260
lknoblauch@st-albert.net
www.stalbertfcss.ca

never underestimate the power of caring

Family Communication Tips: When Disaster Strikes!

One must talk little and listen much.

African proverb

One day, something bad will happen. Maybe a grandparent or a pet will die, or maybe a family member will be diagnosed with cancer. Maybe you'll lose your job or get a divorce. Are you and your child equipped to communicate effectively when disaster strikes?

Tips for . . .

All parents

- First, try to distinguish your emotions about the news from your feelings about what to tell your kids. It's always harder to talk about bad news when it's an emotional issue for you.
- Be open to your kids' reactions. Some may cry. Others may get angry. Some may not seem to react at all. Don't read too much into your child's initial reaction. For some kids, it takes awhile for the news to sink in.
- Give information according to your child's age. Younger children will require less information than older teenagers. After sharing information, answer any questions your kids may have.
- Reassure your kids. When bad things happen, they need to hear that you love them and that you're there for them. If you're uncertain how long you can be there for your children (such as when you receive a terminal prognosis), make sure they know of other caring, trusted adults who will also be there for them.
- Talk about what the bad news means for them personally. Be as clear as possible about how the bad news will make their life change—or not change. Older kids will want to know more details about this than younger kids.

Parents with children ages birth to 5

- Break bad news to your child in a comfortable place. For example, have your child sit on your lap or talk to your child on his or her bed. Having your child's favorite comfort item available (a blanket, a stuffed animal or favorite toy) can also help.
- Try to be calm—even if the news is upsetting to you. If you're overly emotional, your child may feel like he or she needs to take care of you instead of having his or her own reaction.
- Roll with your child's reactions. Many young children don't understand what "death" or "divorce" or other big topics are. They may shrug their shoulders and then ask you to play. They're not being insensitive. Usually they aren't old enough to understand what the bad news is all about.

Parents with children ages 6 to 9

- Do something special with your child. You can say that when bad things happen, it often helps to do something you enjoy to try to feel better. For example, ask your child what he or she would like to do with you. Maybe your child will want to go the playground or play a board game.
- Don't be surprised if your child tries to blame you or someone else for the bad news. It's hard for children at this age to understand that sometimes bad things can just happen.
- Try to find age-appropriate books on the bad-news topic from your local library. Kids often feel less alone when they read books about other kids going through the same experience.

Parents with children ages 10 to 15

- Since some kids at this age are emotionally volatile, it may be tempting to withhold bad news. It's important to be honest with your kids and not to be afraid of their reactions.
- Be patient with your child's grieving process. Your child may seem fine one day and then a complete wreck the next. Stick with them, reassure them, and answer their questions.
- If you're concerned about how little your child is talking to you about the bad news, talk to other significant adults in your child's life. For example, talk to your child's teacher, coach, or club leader. Sometimes a child will talk to another adult, and it helps if everyone knows the same information.

Parents with children ages 16 to 18

- Older teenagers will often want to know more details about the bad news, but gauge their reactions carefully. Tell them the basic information and see how they respond and what questions they have. Don't be surprised if, later on, you discover your teenager researching the topic on the internet.
- Although older teenagers may seem like they can take on more hardship than younger kids, remember that they still don't have the life experience that you have. Hearing bad news can be extremely difficult on a teenager, and it can sometimes trigger risky behaviors, particularly if they were struggling before the bad news hit or they're feeling extremely vulnerable.
- Model the grief process. Don't display too much emotion—but don't hide all of your emotions, either. It helps older teenagers to see that there are hard times—and very hard times—and that people can get through these tough situations by making positive coping choices. Say that even though you don't feel like exercising, you notice that exercise helps you feel a bit better. Explain that even though you may be tempted to eat badly, you notice that you feel better when you eat healthy. Talking about the temptations as well as the ups and downs (while modeling positive coping strategies) will help your teenager be more intentional about the choices he or she makes.