

After a homicide

Supporting grieving children and young people

When someone a child or young person loves dies by homicide their world is turned upside down, especially if they have lost a parent, sibling, or other close family or whānau member. When someone close to them cares for them, and is there for them, it can help their journey through grief.

Telling them the news

Telling your child or young person the sad news is not easy but if possible, they need to first hear the news from someone close to them. This conversation can be hard, but it's a very important step in helping them through a traumatic situation.

Find a quiet, private place to talk where you will not be interrupted

Turn mobile phones off. You could ask someone you and they trust to be there too. Take some deep breaths. Don't rush it.

Be honest, open, clear, and calm

Tell them what has happened by giving the key facts in words they can understand. Give them bite size pieces of information and avoid sharing disturbing details they don't need to know. If you don't know something they ask about, say so, but let them know you'll tell them more when you can. It's much better for them to get the facts from someone who loves them than hearing false or hurtful information from somewhere else, such as school mates or social media. If they've heard from others, ask what they know and correct any details that are not accurate.

You could say, something like. "Let's sit down together because I have something difficult I need to talk to you about. I am very sorry to tell you that a sad and terrible thing has happened to X. They were ... (say where they were and simply what happened here). X was hurt so badly by the person that they died."

CONTACT

Victim Support

Get Help: 0800 VICTIM (0800 842 846)
enquiries@victimsupport.org.nz
victimsupport.org.nz



Don't use words like "passed away," "gone," or "he's gone to sleep." Children tend to be very literal, and these phrases can make them confused and uncertain about what's actually happened. They may think the person will come back or wake up later.

Some words may need explaining.

- **Death:** When a person's body stops working and they can't be alive anymore. We won't be able to see them anymore.
- **Homicide or murder:** When a person ends someone else's life on purpose.
- **Grief or grieving:** Normal thoughts, feelings, and reactions we have after someone close to us has died to help us deal with what's happened.
- **Trauma or traumatic:** A sudden, frightening, and overwhelming thing that happens.

Repeat the information

The news can be such a shock they might not take it in the first time. You may get the same question asked more than once so be patient. It's their way of making sense of what they've heard. You can help them understand by explaining what happened again.

Let them know they are safe

Keep calm and try to be reassuring, encouraging, affectionate, and loving. This will help bring a sense of security and comfort. Children and young people can blame themselves and feel guilty about what has happened. Reassure them they did nothing to cause this death.

Let them know what may happen next

It might be that the police must do an investigation, or if they can't stay at home, explain where they'll be staying and who will look after them.



Let them know they are safe.



Don't be surprised if they seem disinterested or want to do something else

Children and young people process things differently. They'll be dealing with this in their own way. This doesn't mean they haven't heard but it's just their way of showing they have all the information they can handle right now. They'll want to talk or might show distress when they're ready.

Let them know they can ask questions at any time

If they do, give them your full attention. Follow their lead and be prepared for some blunt questions and probing for more detail. This can be hard to hear and even harder to answer, but honesty builds trust between you.

It's okay to show emotion yourself

It helps them know you're sharing this experience and they're not alone. If emotion becomes too great, step away for a while to catch your breath, then come back to be with them.





Supporting a child or young person who may have discovered or witnessed a homicide

If they saw the homicide happen, or saw or found the person's body they will need loving support and extra understanding from caring adults around them. They may also need help from professionals with trauma support skills.

In a quiet place, gently ask them what happened to them. Keep it simple. They may not remember much at first and it may come back to them later. They might not want to talk because they're in shock or very frightened. Just be with them quietly instead.

Let them know you know it was scary for them, and they're safe now.

This is a very traumatic and overwhelming experience for them. They're likely to have some physical reactions, like feeling sick, headaches, stomach aches, being shaky, less appetite, or bedwetting. Difficult memories may keep coming back. They might find it hard to sleep and could have bad dreams about what they saw. They may be more anxious than usual.

A police detective may need to ask them what they witnessed. Police have strict procedures for interviewing children so this would only be done with sensitivity and professional support.

Arrange for them to see a doctor, counsellor, or psychologist to help them deal with what happened. Ask your Support Worker about local trauma counselling support. **You can call us 24/7 on 0800 842 846 to be connected with a Support Worker.**

What is different about this type of loss for children and young people?

Children and young people will always experience distress when someone close dies. However, after a homicide the world around them can often feel especially frightening and unsafe. The death itself is violent and disturbing to think about or imagine. People around them are likely to be in extreme distress. All kinds of official people and processes must happen which disrupt normal life and add more stress. The funeral or tangihanga may be delayed. There might be a lot of media and community attention focused on the death and the immediate family. The offender may also be someone they know well, which can make for some very conflicted feelings. This kind of loss is usually extraordinarily hard on them.



Having adults they trust and can rely on around them will make them feel less uncertain, and the world a little safer.

Common reactions

Every child will react differently, and this will vary depending on their age and stage of development.

Common reactions after the homicide death of someone close to them include; shock, disbelief, confusion, difficulty concentrating, fear, self-blame and guilt, shame, irritability, anger/rage, revengeful thoughts, sadness, missing them, and feeling unsafe. They may have trouble sleeping, appetite changes, and physical reactions such as stomach aches, headaches, or nausea.

Some may find memories of what they witnessed or imagined disturbing and keep repeating. They may experience nightmares and flashbacks, as if it's all happening again. This can be frightening and leave them confused and feeling out of control. Sometimes trauma reactions can be extremely strong and seeking professional help from a doctor or counsellor will be important. You can ask a Victim Support Worker about counselling options.

Some children and young people may regress in their development. This is normal and temporary but can be a surprise. Their confidence may be knocked back, they might become afraid of the dark again or not want to go to school, toileting progress might go backwards, or bedwetting may start, even in teens.

For more information on the ways different ages may react, including babies and toddlers, go to: <https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group>

Be available, kind, and reliable

Do your best to provide a loving, supportive environment for them. This death will become part of their life story. Having adults they trust and can rely on around them will make them feel less uncertain, and the world a little safer. Draw on any comforting cultural or faith connections that are familiar and provide reassurance to them.

Take care of their everyday needs

Having healthy food, enough water, getting exercise, and enough rest and sleep all help in stressful times as well as time to play or be with friends.

Keep up routines and normal activities

These can be reassuring in uncertain and distressing times. Knowing what to expect, and what can be relied on, can help their world feel safer.

Offer them choices

What's happened can leave children and young people feeling powerless and that things around them are out of control. Giving them some choices about everyday things can empower them and give them renewed confidence. It could be choices over small things, such as what to eat for lunch, what movie to see, or what to wear, if they'd like to go to Kapa Haka or sports practice, or any friends they'd like to have round.



Keep them informed

After a homicide there can be many official processes and people involved for some time. There will be a lengthy investigation, a criminal case before court, media attention, and reactions from many people in their community – friends and strangers. Explain who the people are and their role. As the situation unfolds, keep them up to date with anything they need to know such as when a court case might start, or when sentencing is to happen. Use age appropriate language.

Be as open with them as you can be. It's better they get correct details from you, and can ask questions and feel acknowledged, than they hear things from others that worry or confuse them. Young people especially appreciate being informed and consulted.

Listen well if they want to talk

Let them know it's okay if they don't want to talk and remind them that you're there if they'd like to do so at another time. Talk with them about other people they could speak to as well.

Reassure them it's normal to have strong thoughts and feelings after someone dies

Talk about helpful ways to manage them, such as taking some slow, deep breaths if they're getting anxious, or crying or talking to someone they trust when they're really sad. Use books for children about grief and understanding homicide.

Skylight provide support and resources for grieving children. You can contact Skylight on 0800 299 100 for available children's books after a traumatic event or homicide or ask for these at your local library.

Some useful resources include:

- *A Terrible Thing Happened* (by Margaret Holmes)
- *After a Murder: A Workbook for Grieving Kids* (by the Dougy Centre)
- *Something Has Happened* (by Skylight)
- *When Tough Stuff Happens* (by Skylight)

Help them remember the person

Ask about their positive memories, so they don't just focus on how the person died. Share stories, photos, and memories of the person with them, make a scrap book or box, give them a framed photo of the person to keep, or plant a tree in the person's memory. Support any ideas they might have to remember the person.



Let them know that having a laugh and enjoying things is okay

This can help release stress that's inside and can distract them from some strong feelings.

Before they go back to school

Ask them what they want to tell their teacher, or their dean if at secondary school.

Tell their school what has happened. Talk with their teacher or dean. You may need to keep in contact with them and update them as needed.

Discuss what your child or young person can do if others ask questions they don't want to answer, or if they say mean things. It can help when they know their teacher or dean is there to help when things get tough, and if they know what to say and do if others say or do hurtful or upsetting things.



Grief after homicide
can be a long journey.

Check in with them

Find moments to have a chat and spend time with them to see how they are doing. Children and young people often worry about different sorts of things and they'll often use their play to express what's inside. Look out for any concerning changes in mood or behaviour.

Got concerns?

Trust your instincts if you feel they are struggling, or behaviour changes are causing problems. Talk about these honestly with them, and don't let them build up. Seek out extra help and support from family, whānau, close friends, trusted elders, rangatira, or professionals. Speak with their teachers, or dean if in secondary school, nurse, or doctor.

Your Victim Support Worker can explain the available support options in your area. You can call Victim Support 24/7 on **0800 842 846** to be connected to a Support Worker.

Support them in the future

Grief and reactions to this traumatic experience are likely to continue for some time. As they grow, children and young people can continue to re-experience or question what happened at different developmental stages and milestones. Be especially supportive when it's an anniversary or special day, such as a birthday or Christmas. They may ask you to go over things as they work through it and what it means for their lives.

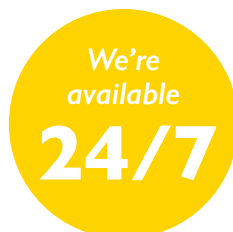
You can't take their loss away, but you can listen well, answer questions, reassure, encourage, and be there for them. Grief after homicide can be a long journey.

Get support for yourself too

This is an extremely tough time for you, and for your whole family and whānau. Your wellbeing matters too, so look after yourself.

Find people who can help you as you support your children and young people or speak to a Victim Support Worker about any concerns or questions. You don't have to do this alone. You can call us 24/7 on **0800 842 846** to be connected with a Support Worker.

We are here for you. Our support is completely free and confidential, and available throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.



**Our service is
free, personal,
and confidential**





Recommended Resources

Trauma - How To Talk To Your Kids About It (Kidshealth NZ)

Some resources, in a range of languages, about how to talk to kids about trauma can be found on the NZ Kids Health website at www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about

NZ Ministry of Education info sheets for Parents/Caregivers

This information was developed following the Canterbury earthquakes in 2011, however the advice remains relevant after any major traumatic event. Scroll down to After an Emergency resources to **Supporting People** to see the range available.

www.education.govt.nz/school/health-safety-and-wellbeing/emergencies-and-traumatic-incidents/

Skylight resources and support packs

Skylight makes available for purchase or loan a wide range of resources for all ages and stages, including the workbooks **Something Has Happened** (3-6 year olds) and **When Tough Stuff Happens** (7-12 year olds). They also offer free information packs tailored to your child's situation. Phone them 0800 299 100 or 04 939 6767 weekdays, or visit www.skylight.org.nz



Counselling Support Options

Different organisations around the country offer counselling and support for children and young people.

These links provide a list of the ways you can look for a child or youth counsellor in your area.

- Search for services in your own area on this online Family Services Directory: <https://family.services.govt.nz/#/> Look in the category **Family/Whānau** services for **Counselling**, then add in your location.
- www.talkingworks.co.nz (Talking Works)
- NZ Association of Counsellors 04 471 0307 www.nzac.org.nz - see search for a **NZAC Counsellor**
- NZ College of Clinical Psychologists 04 472 4088 includes a directory and downloadable lists: **Find a Clinical Psychologist**
- NZ Psychological Society 04 473 4889 www.psychology.org.nz includes a directory: **Find a Psychologist**
- www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/find-a-gp-or-counsellor (NZ Mental Health Foundation)

Or call or text 1737 to talk to a trained counsellor about your concerns (24/7) and find out about services in your area.

Examples of national organisations you can contact include:

- Barnardos
www.barnardos.org.nz 0800 BARNARDOS (0800 227 627)
- Skylight
www.skylight.org.nz FREEPHONE: 0800 299 100
- Family Works, Provided by Presbyterian Support Services.
www.familyworks.org.nz 0508 TO HELP (0508 864 357)
- Māori Women's Welfare League offers Whānau Toko i te Ora parenting programme for under five-year-olds. Branches throughout New Zealand. Email mwwl@mwwl.org.nz Phone 04 473 6451

In crisis right now?

- For urgent mental health support for your child or young person in your area see www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/ for a list of your local DHB services for children and young people
- If it is an emergency, such as a suicide threat, call 111 and ask for assistance, or visit a doctor or hospital emergency department as soon as possible with your child or young person.

Helplines for children and young people

- **What's Up**
Kids and teenagers up to 18 years old can talk with professional counsellors. Available 1pm–11pm daily. (Barnardos) 0800 WHATS UP (0800 942 8787)
- **Kidslines**
Kids up to 14 years old can talk with teenage volunteers, who are supervised by adults. Daily after school 4pm–6pm. (Lifeline Aotearoa) 0800 KIDSLINE (0800 543 754)
- **Youthline**
Confidential youth help and information. For intermediate-aged kids and older. 0800 376 633 Free txt: 234 webchat at www.youthline.co.nz

Victim Support

0800 842 846 www.victimsupport.org.nz

We can support parents and whānau with information, support, and coping tools, and help you find the right local services for your child or young person's needs.