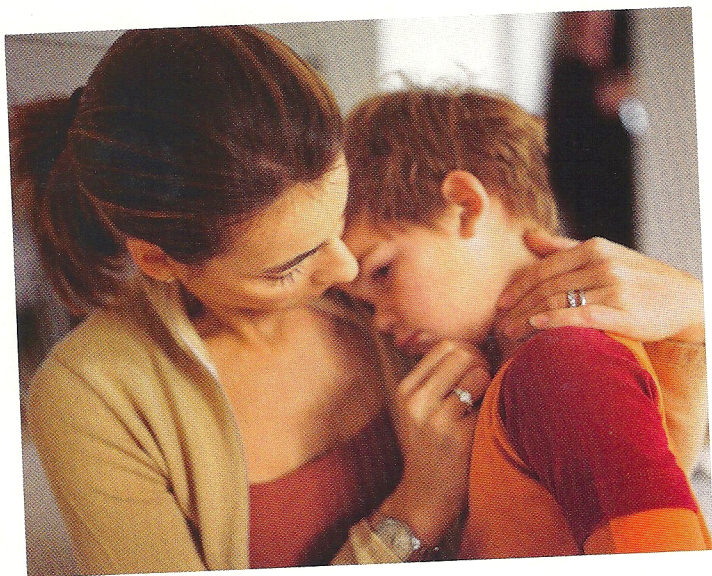


How do I give my child bad news?

When an earth-shattering event rocks a family, you need to choose your words carefully. The right conversation will help children cope better with the ordeal **BY TRACEY DAVIES**



'Talk when you're relaxed and have the time and space to chat comfortably,' advises Naomi Richards, a life coach who works with children (thekidscoach.org.uk). 'Stay at home so if they want to run to their room or cry, they're in their own space. Be direct and as truthful as you can, but remember to be age-appropriate and use words they can identify with.' She advises against showing too much emotion, but does advocate telling them how much you love them.

Phrases such as 'Some things will change for a while, but that's OK' can help children understand that things will feel odd, but not for ever. Try to reference something in their life that they can identify with – school, for instance ('Remember when you got a new teacher? It was strange, but now it feels normal'). Older children, in particular, need an explanation. 'We tried our best to resolve our problems but now we want to try a new

FURTHER READING

Sad Book by Michael Rosen (Walker Books).

A beautifully illustrated (by Quentin Blake) read for adults and children about love and loss, which explains why it's OK to be sad sometimes

way, so our family can be happy' is a direct and positive way to talk about a divorce. Guilt is a common reaction to a break-up in children, so reinforce that it's not their fault.

Don't tell them anything that will cause unnecessary distress, but be honest. Avoid euphemisms – 'Grandad has gone to sleep' – because this can confuse children. For children under seven, simple phrasing such as 'Grandad was very old and his body didn't work properly any more' will help them understand. Offer more than a simple 'Grandad was sick' because this can make children worry that they might also die when they get ill.

'When someone has died, children often worry that someone else they know will die,' says child-behaviour expert Joanne Mallon (readyforten.com). 'This may show, for example, in bed wetting, problems at school, tantrums or arguing with siblings. Stay calm – it's better that your child expresses anxiety rather than bottling it up.'

It's hard to know exactly how a child will react. I recently had to tell my little girl that she has cerebral palsy, and explain what caused her disability and what it means for her future. There were no tears, no tantrums – she just quietly asked if she could still go to ballet. Be prepared for radio silence, as well as tears, as they try to process their feelings. However, if after several weeks, your child shows no signs of acceptance, you may need to seek further help. Helptoheal.co.uk lists accredited child counsellors, or speak to your GP.

Life-changing conversations about death, divorce or disability are rarely over in one discussion, but if you answer questions honestly, with patience and understanding, you're on the way to getting it right. ■