

Be **PREPARED** to Communicate

It can be difficult to know what to say, how much to say, or when to say anything about challenging topics with a child. During stressful times, it's important to have open communication in a way that children can understand. Use this guide to help navigate difficult conversations, such as a family illness or injury, separation, grief, or other stressful circumstances.



PROBE GENTLY

Ask what the child knows, find out what they have heard and what they think. Start with a generic question or statement like, *"What do you know about [topic]?"* or *"Many kids feel sad about [topic]."*

REASSURE

When asking a question, children often want to know if they (and their loved ones) are going to be okay. Restore a sense of safety by describing ways in which parents, caregivers, and other adults are keeping the child safe (e.g., going to doctor's appointments for check-ups, looking both ways before crossing the street, etc.).



EXPLAIN

Identify and address inaccurate information and share where there has been a misunderstanding. Explain clearly and in simple words what happened. Don't forget to provide praise! *"Thank you for asking such hard questions."* and *"I appreciate you sharing with me."*



PROVIDE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE RESPONSES

Think about what the child needs to hear. Consider their level of cognitive understanding and use words they can understand. Ask yourself these questions:

Does the child have magical thinking?

Do you need to be concrete in the information you provide?

What is the child's understanding of illness? Of death and dying?

What is the child's experience with risk and safety?



ANSWER QUESTIONS

Listen and pause before responding. Answer one step at a time, then pause. Continue to answer questions until there are no more questions and comments. Let the child know you will get back to them if there are questions you cannot answer in the moment.

ROUTINES

Maintain as many routines as possible to promote predictability. Keep a schedule, but be flexible. Encourage and practice good sleep hygiene. Plan something fun and safe to look forward to!

EMOTION COACHING

Validate experiences and encourage healthy emotion communication. Avoid telling a child what they should or shouldn't feel. Share your own emotions on a regular basis, and describe the strategies you use to manage stress or discomfort.



DO IT AGAIN!

Leave the door open for additional discussions and check in frequently. Understand that children will grow, develop, and learn new information over time. Address new questions when they arise. Invite the child to talk again whenever they would like.