



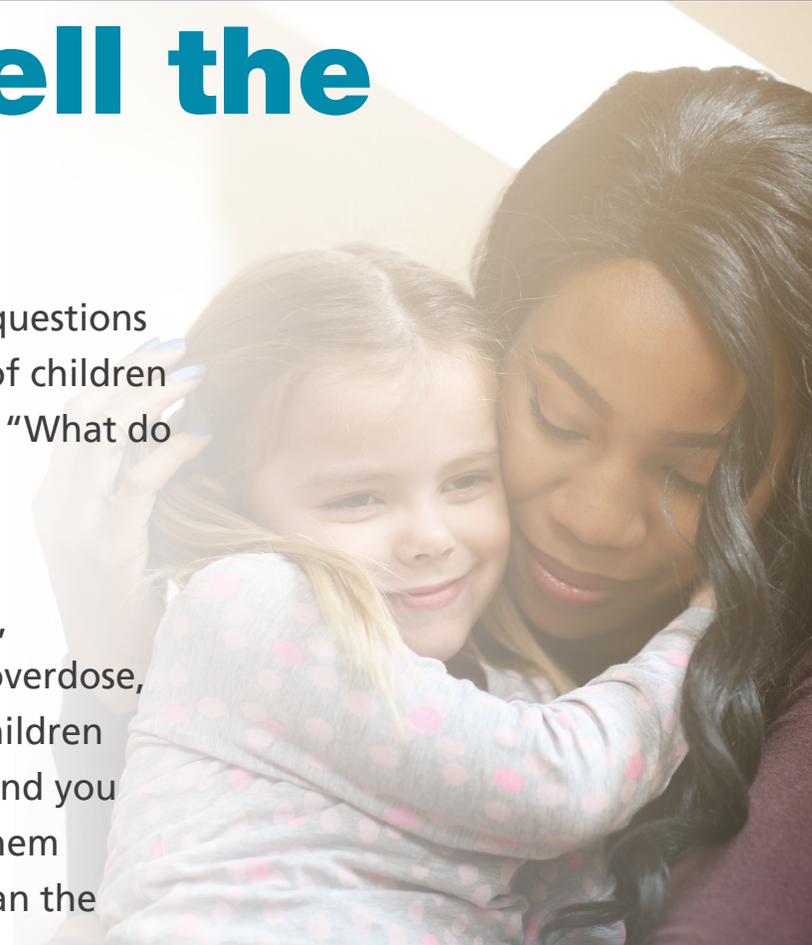
What do I tell the children?

One of the most common and important questions asked by loved ones who are taking care of children impacted by substance use in the family is “What do I say to the children?”.

Whether a loved one is in active addiction, receiving treatment, or has died from an overdose, it can be difficult to know what to say. Children may be asking questions, hard questions and you are faced with a difficult decision to tell them the truth or tell them something other than the truth to protect them.

If something other than the truth is shared, a family secret is formed which deepens feelings of shame, blame, guilt, and stigma. Children quickly receive the message, “don’t talk, don’t feel, don’t trust”. These family rules lead to hiding, lying, shame, and isolation. Many times the truth comes out, creating a distrust with those who have kept it hidden.

If their questions are answered with silence, children will fill in the gaps and create a story about what has happened. Feeling as though they are responsible, this often includes feelings of misplaced guilt and shame.



Children cope best with hard times when they are given simple and honest answers to their questions. It is best to share small amounts of information (2-3 sentences) and then let children ask questions. Sometimes they will have more questions right away. Other times, they will come back later with questions. Let them know who they can talk to when they have questions.

Simple and honest answers may sound like:

- "It's not your fault. Nothing you did or said caused your loved one to drink or use drugs. Addiction is a grown up problem."
- "Treatment is a place someone goes to get the help and support they need to stop drinking alcohol or using drugs."
- "Addiction makes people sick. They need help and support to get well."
- "Getting well from addiction means taking good care of yourself every day. That might mean taking medication, going to a counselor, or meeting with a group."
- "You are not alone. Many children have loved ones with addiction. "
- "It is normal to have all kinds of feelings like anger, embarrassment, and sadness. We cope with our feelings by naming them and talking about them with people we trust."
- "They love you very much. But when they are sick with addiction, their brain doesn't work the way it should. When they get better, they will be able to show their love more often."
- "Sometimes people get better and then get sick again. That happens a lot with this disease. But, they can keep trying to get better. Many people do get better."

Many times we avoid telling our children the truth about grown up problems to protect them. But, children know more than we realize and tend to blame themselves for grown up problems like addiction. It is healthier for children and families to learn and talk about addiction, treatment, and recovery together.

For more information on how to support children impacted by addiction:
Call **717-327-9451** or visit LancasterJoiningForces.org/Families