

Coordinated Investigations in Cases of Child Death

There are several different entities involved in the investigative process when a child dies from accidental or inflicted trauma, or when a cause of death is not immediately apparent. These investigations will be most effective and the least traumatizing for the child's family if all responding agencies establish a mutually agreed upon process for coordinating with one another throughout the course of the investigation. Important decision points include agreeing on who should be notified of a child's death and when, and who should be conducting which parts of the investigation and when, to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort or gaps in the case.

As local professionals involved in responding to children's deaths, you may want to convene all investigating entities in your jurisdiction to discuss what process will work best in your community. The county Medical Examiner and county Prosecutor are critical to these discussions, as their ability to fulfill their professional mandates rests largely on the effectiveness of these investigations. Others who should also be involved in these discussions include local, county, and state law enforcement agencies covering the area; Medical Examiner Investigators; Children's Protective Services (CPS); 911 Dispatch; Emergency Medical Services; and hospital Emergency Department management (especially important for those cases in which the child is driven directly to the hospital by the family).

While there may be considerable overlap in the information each entity must capture during the investigation, there are also agency-specific documentation requirements. For example, CPS is required to document the child's ancestry to comply with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). There are also applicable laws and policies that may constrain one entity from sharing certain information with another. Because of these often-nuanced factors, it is crucial that the comprehensive process for gathering and sharing the information that each entity needs be worked out among all players involved prior to a death occurring.

When children under the age of two die suddenly and unexpectedly, the use of the *State of Michigan Sudden and Unexplained Child Death Scene Investigation Form* (https://www.keepingkidsalive.org/wp-content/uploads/MISceneTool2018_editable.pdf) is required by Public Act 179 of 2004. In addition, it may be appropriate to conduct a doll re-enactment with the person(s) who placed and found the child. The statute does not specify **who** should complete the *Investigation Form* or the doll scene re-enactment. That should be determined in your collaborative child death response discussions. It is important to avoid an uncoordinated investigation that can lead to bereaved family members having to go through these aspects of the investigative process multiple times with different agencies.

It is important to produce written documentation of what was agreed upon during these consensus-building discussions that can be referred to by all members of the local investigating entities. Of course, that written documentation can always be amended if/when the parties involved agree that it is warranted. For more child death investigation resources, visit: <https://www.keepingkidsalive.org/death-investigation/>.