

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHEN SOMEONE THEY LOVE HAS DIED THROUGH SUICIDE

The death of someone important can cause great pain and sadness, whatever the cause of death. Some of the children and young people we have worked with tell us that bereavement after suicide is particularly difficult, as they are coping not just with the bereavement itself, but also with the fact that their loved one took their own life. Children can feel very alone and lost in their grief at this difficult time, and might face additional pressures and pain. Children may be asking agonising questions about their bereavement, questions both of grownups and of themselves.

The feelings commonly associated with bereavement may well still be present, including shock, deep sadness and occasional anger. Grief after suicide commonly brings with it other feelings such as guilt, shame and self-blame. One of our children described it as '...ordinary grief, but much louder, stronger and harder'.

WHAT CAN HELP CHILDREN AT THIS DIFFICULT TIME?

These tips may be helpful:

- Be present and available
- Listen closely and carefully
- Demonstrate your love as much as possible with words and hugs
- Be willing to sit with your child in silence
- Let them know it's okay to cry and to feel scared or angry. Make it known that you won't judge them
- Provide help with problem solving in a spirit of partnership and not as an authority
- Be honest when you are uncertain about answers to questions
- Be respectful of the grieving process and patient with its progress
- If appropriate and manageable, remember the deceased and talk about this person
- When the time is right. Look for appropriate ways to promote positive feelings in the present and to give hope for the future

Telling the truth

Being honest is widely accepted to be the best approach. Children need to know that they can trust us and part of that trust relies on us being honest with them. You may be tempted not to tell the truth in order to protect the child, but also because the truth is very painful for grownups to bear as well.

Remember that hiding the truth can be problematic and the child is likely to find out the truth at some point in the future, so getting into complicated situations where you have to remember which 'fibs' you have told can be very stressful, no matter how good the intention behind the fibs.



Keeping it age sensitive

Of course honesty has to be appropriate to the age and understanding of the child. Telling the truth need not mean giving every little detail about what has happened. Children deserve information that helps them to understand, given to them using language that they understand. Balloons can help by talking this through with grownups before they speak to their children. There are no right or wrong ways for doing this, but talking it through in advance can help.

Some caregivers who ask for our support want to know how best to explain suicide to their children.



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This will differ from one family to the next, but some examples of explaining why suicide happens might be:

- *'He had an illness in his brain/mind and he died.'*
- *'Her brain/mind got very sick and she died.'*
- *'The brain is an organ of the body just like the heart, liver and kidneys. Sometimes it can get sick, just like other organs. Sometimes it gets so sick that the person dies.'*
- *'She had an illness called depression and because of this illness her mind was very sick and it caused her to die.'*

A more detailed explanation might be:

- *'Our thoughts and feelings come from our brain, and sometimes a person's brain can get very sick. The sickness can cause a person to feel very poorly inside, and it can also makes a person's thoughts get all muddled and mixed up, so sometimes they can't think clearly. Some people can't think of any other way of stopping the pain that they feel inside.'*

A child needs to understand that the person who died loved them, but that because of the illness he or she may have been unable to convey that or to think about how the child would feel after the death. The child needs to know that the suicide was not their fault, and that nothing they said or did, or didn't say or do, caused the death.

Answering questions

Once children have been told the truth, they will then probably have questions, and of course this can be tricky. Grownups can be torn between wanting to help children to cope and feel better, whilst also wanting to be truthful in answering their questions.

Age is a factor in understanding the type and amount of information to provide. Some children will be satisfied with brief explanations, whilst others might have lots of questions which they should be allowed to ask and which as far as is possible should be answered. Remember though that you might not have the answer yourself, and it's fine to say that too. That is also being honest.

Some children might ask questions related to the morals of suicide and this can be painful and confusing. The simple truth is that suicide is not good or bad; right or wrong. It is something that happens when the pain is bigger than the ability to cope with and manage the pain.

Whatever approach is taken when explaining suicide to children, they need to know they can talk about it and ask questions whenever they feel the need. They need to understand they won't always feel the way they do now, that things will get better, and that they'll be loved and taken care of no matter what. At the same time their pain and grief will be given a voice and won't be ignored or underestimated.

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Every child is unique

every child and every family is unique and how suicide is disclosed and discussed will depend on the individual family and the specific circumstances surrounding the death. You might need to explain what has happened in stages, being patient with the child as they understand at their own pace. You may need to repeat certain conversations, possibly over the course of many months or years as the child reflects on what happened, thinks about it more and develops their intellectual capacity and maturity. Note that some children may avoid talking because they are worried about upsetting you, so as far as you can it's important to send a message to them that talking is okay and you can grieve together.

Fears and worries

Children may experience new worries and fears after a suicide. They might be fearful that others will leave them, that suicide runs in the family, that the suicide was their fault and they are in some way to blame. They need to be supported and reassured by the people they trust so that they can cope with these fears. There are many complicated feelings and thoughts that children and adults experience following a death through suicide, and these take time, patience and support to effectively process.



Changes in behaviour

Children will react and cope differently but it is common for there to be some changes in their behaviour as they try to adapt to what has happened. Some children become withdrawn and self-isolating, others become more clingy and others angry and aggressive. Some children regress to behaviour more typical of a younger age. Sometimes caregivers may be frustrated or even hurt and upset by their children's behaviour, but it is important to remember that they are doing it to try and find a way to cope.

School

Children may struggle to concentrate in class, they may find homework more difficult to focus on and they may generally find the demands of school quite challenging. They may feel isolated in their peer group and may face difficult questions from classmates. It helps to have strong communication between home and school so that children can receive the best possible support.

A note to caregivers

In all of this, the caregivers matter too. You are much better able to support your children if you have also got support for yourself. It is of course completely natural to worry about your children after a suicide. Partners, family and friends can be a great source of support and there are also organisations such as CRUSE who can support you with your own grief.

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-support/>