

Supporting Children and Teens after a Suicide Death

from The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

Explaining suicide death to a child or teen can feel overwhelming and intimidating. As adults, we often want to protect them from the stigma and shame that can accompany such a death. Here are some tips for talking with children and teens about a suicide death and ways to support them in their grief.

TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE DEATH

Tell the truth

How do I tell my child or teen? It's a question we hear a lot. Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in language children can understand. Let their questions guide what else to share. You do not have to describe in detail what happened (unless they ask, and then you should answer honestly). You might say, "I have very sad news, Mommy died of something called suicide. She shot herself," or "Your dad died last night, he took too many pills." Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost (as in "we lost her"), as they can confuse children.



Children and teens might blame themselves and wonder if they could have done something to prevent the death.

Even though these discussions can be hard to have, being honest and open is an important first step in helping grieving children. It minimizes the confusion that comes from misinformation, and also keeps children from using their limited energy and inner resources to figure out what happened. Children who are not told the truth often fill in the blanks themselves, sometimes with a story that is worse than what actually happened. In fact, many children and teens come to believe that they somehow caused the death, especially if no one will tell them what happened. News also travels fast, and it is important for children to hear about the death from a caring adult rather than through social media or gossip.

The question "Why?"

"Why?" is often the first question everyone asks after someone dies of suicide. You can support children and teens by explaining there are many factors that can lead someone to die of suicide. A suicide death is not the result of a single event such as a break up, loss of a job, a death, or major disappointment, even though it may seem like that event was the cause of the death. Suicide death is a result of someone experiencing unbearable emotional pain, feeling hopeless about it ever getting better, and thinking death is the only way to stop that pain.

Children and teens might blame themselves and wonder if they could have done something to prevent the death. They may also fear they or someone else they care about will die of suicide. You can reassure them that the death was not their fault. You can also offer support by listening, encouraging them to come to you with questions and concerns, and helping them find ways to express their thoughts and emotions. Sharing with them about the ways you are seeking support for yourself can ease fears they may have about your health and safety.

REACTIONS AND BEHAVIORS

Allow for a variety of emotional reactions

Children may experience many different emotions, including sadness, anger, frustration, fear, confusion, powerlessness, loneliness, shame, guilt, numbness, and relief. Their reactions may depend on their age, personality, experiences with

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death, and developmental level. Sometimes children don't show any visible reaction at all. There are no right or wrong feelings in grief, just individual experiences.

It is not uncommon for a child or teen to feel relief after the death, especially if mental health issues created turmoil. Some may feel the parent abandoned them, or that they were unlovable. Children tend to move quickly from one emotion to another, crying one minute and asking for a snack the next. With powerful emotions like anger and fear, consider finding ways for children to safely express them. Remind children that while it's okay to have big feelings, "You are really, really angry right now, and that's okay," it's not okay to hurt anyone or anything. "You can be really angry, but you can't kick me or throw your toys at the dog. You can punch the punching bag or stomp on the bubble wrap."

WHAT HELPS

Compassionate listening

When children and teens are grieving, people can be quick to offer advice and give opinions. What's most helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or evaluating. It can be tempting to minimize their feelings, or convince them to think or feel differently than they do. If it's a case of misinformation, it's helpful to provide the correct details, but still allow them to express their take on things. Sometimes the best response is to validate their thoughts and feelings. For example, "You really get uncomfortable when kids at school talk about hating their mom. You wish they knew what it's like to have a mom die." Responding in this way helps children and teens trust that you will listen, leaving them more likely to come to you when they're hurting or needing advice. You don't have to have all of the answers. There are many questions surrounding a suicide death that do not have answers. It's okay to say you don't know.

Routines and consistency

Life is often in upheaval after a suicide death, so it's helpful to find ways to create predictability. Examples include: routines around breakfast, getting to school, after-school, chores, and bedtime. Children may also need some flexibility so they know what to expect, "Bedtime is at 7:30pm," but can trust that if they need something different ("Tonight we can read an extra story"), the people in their world will be responsive.

Choices

When someone dies, children can feel powerless and out of control. Giving children choices can help them regain a sense of power and control in their world and trust that they can have a say in their lives. Provide day to day choices that are in line with their developmental level. For example: "Would you like hot or cold cereal for breakfast?" "I need help with dinner, would you like to set the table or clear the dishes?" "The trash needs to go out today, would you rather take it out this morning or after school?"

It's also important to let children and teens make choices about issues directly related to the death and their grief. Examples include asking children and teens if they want to help with sorting the belongings of the person who died (and which items they would like to keep) and how they want to acknowledge significant days such as holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of the death.

Space for play and creativity

Children and teens often turn to play, movement, and creativity to express themselves and make sense of their situation. Consider offering opportunities for playing with dolls and puppets; creating art of all kinds (remember the process is more important than the product); and writing, journaling, and making videos. Big energy play like running, punching

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a bag, shooting hoops, pounding on a drum, and sports can be safe ways to express strong emotions, as can playing an instrument, writing songs, or simply listening to music.

Remember the person who died

Remember and talk about how the person lived rather than just about how they died. Their life was unique and important. After a suicide death, people often avoid talking about the person who died because they don't know what to say. You can help by sharing pictures, stories, and details about the person's life: "Your daddy really liked going fishing with you," or "Your mom was a great cook, I know you loved her pancakes." Sometimes just remembering to say the person's name can be very meaningful to children and teens.



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Funerals, memorials, and celebration of life services

Many families who have experienced a suicide death wonder if they should hold a service and if children should be allowed to attend. Every family is different, but we've learned from children and teens that having some way of saying goodbye is important. Ask children and teens how much they want to be involved in the planning. They often have clear ideas about how they want to honor the person who died. For some families, choosing to have a service is another way of breaking down the stigma that can surround a suicide death.

Support at school

School can provide routine, familiarity, and consistency. It can also be a source of stress, depending on how understanding and flexible the school community is. Talk with teachers and other staff about the death and how they can be supportive. Ask your child what they would like to share with their classmates and others in the school, and help children plan how they will respond to questions. Here are some examples: "My brother died of suicide." "My mom died from taking too many pills." "My dad died, that is all I want to say right now."

Sometimes families are surprised when members of the school community know more about the death than you and your children had planned to share. Consider preparing children for unexpected and sometimes unkind questions and comments.

Be aware of words

When talking about a suicide death the words you use matter. There are some ways of talking about it that can add to the shame and stigma surrounding suicide. For example, consider avoiding the phrase "committed suicide." Committed is a word associated with criminal behavior ("He committed a felony"). Instead, try saying "he died by suicide" or "she killed herself." Using this language decreases stigma and judgment by talking about suicide the way we would any other type of death ("She died of cancer"). Another challenging phrase is "successfully completed suicide." Remembering someone for being successful or unsuccessful at killing themselves adds to stigma. Negative comments such as, "That was such a selfish act," "He was so crazy, no wonder he killed himself," and "What a cowardly way to go," are not helpful. If questions come up, you can ask, "You're wondering if Daddy was being selfish. What do you think?" You can then add something to help them better understand how intense emotional pain can lead people to feel hopeless and think death is the only option to stop the pain they are in.

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Address the stigma

Talking openly and answering questions honestly is the one of the best ways to decrease stigma. It is often a shocking and uncomfortable topic and most people don't know what to say. By talking openly about it at home, you help children and teens feel less afraid of what has happened and more prepared to respond to the discomfort and judgment of others.



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your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them that you will have the energy and presence to be there for them. A great place to start is the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. [<https://afsp.org/find-support/>]

These are just a few tips for supporting children and teens after a suicide death. Grief is unique to each person and every family, so adapt these suggestions as needed.

Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from over 40,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades. To order online, visit www.dougy.org or www.tdcbookstore.org or call 503.775.5683.



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