

Communicating with suicide bereaved children



about grief

It can be very challenging for adults to know what to say to children following a suicide. Adults may find it difficult to tell children what has happened, however, communicating clearly with children is helpful to them in dealing with their grief and in feeling safe and secure.

Particularly following a suicide there can be a desire by adults to protect children from the truth and hide from them what has happened. However, for children to adjust to the death of a parent they need a realistic and coherent understanding of what has happened. If they do not have this they will tend to fill in the gaps with their imagination which can be unsettling and create anxiety.

Children will tend to be aware that something is happening that they don't know about; they may hear half-truths or exaggerated details from other children. For these reasons it is advisable that children are given information from a trusted adult who cares for them.

Effective communication that is clear and honest helps to reassure children that someone will take care of them physically and emotionally. It also helps to create a renewed sense of safety, security and trust. It is preferable to use language that is familiar to the child, that they will understand and that is comfortable for you.

Children tend to grieve differently to adults. Their grief will be intermittent, they will move in and out of the experience, and at times, may appear unaffected by what has happened. It is also important to remember that children will continue to grieve as they encounter new stages of their development. This means that as their emotional and cognitive abilities develop

they will express their grief in new ways and they will have different questions which may require different or more complex answers.

Children generally will learn to grieve by watching and learning from you or a significant adult. Often after suicide bereavement it is difficult to function with regards to your own needs, so if you are having difficulties it is important that you seek some support from family, friends or available support services.

The sense of being out of control emotionally is often a part of grief that may overwhelm or frighten some kids. Grieving is normal and healthy, therefore assisting your child to accept this and find constructive ways to express and experience grief is important.

At Home

The following suggestions are made to assist you at home.

Communication:

- be open and honest; use the words dead or death
- be honest and open with children about the suicide. Use language the child understands and that you are comfortable with
- to avoid stigma use the word suicided or took their life rather than committed suicide. This avoids reference to a crime
- answer facts in short simple sentences without unnecessary detail
- be available to listen and maybe assist with any concerns your child may have
- respect their views with non-judgemental responses
- keep them informed of how they are doing

Support After Suicide

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Web:
supportaftersuicide.org.au

A program of
Jesuit Social Services

Emotions and actions:

- give comfort, hugs, and reassurance as needed by your child
- stick to day to day routine and schedules as much as possible
- reduce change to a minimum
- take time to prepare them for change.
- allow your child to express all emotions in a safe way, eg. find healthy ways to vent anger, it is okay to cry. Emotional storms only last a short time.
- make time for just being together, take time out, re-establish recreational activities and outings as soon as you can.

Thinking and behaviour:

- your child may struggle with thoughts like “What’s the purpose of life?”, “Who will look after me if you die too?”
- your child may revert to magical thinking or earlier coping mechanisms, relay supernatural visions or experiences.

Grief education

These points may help you to support your child in the experience of grief:

- take time to talk with your child about the person’s *life*, not only their death
- teach your child the importance of making time to eat properly, exercise and rest
- it is okay to have fun, encourage them to be kids, play, explore and laugh
- re-involve the child in chores and responsibilities as soon as they are ready to cope with them again
- reassure them about their short-term goals, let them know you are there to help them find ways to adjust to life without the deceased.

School

Work with your child’s school

Initially:

- inform your child’s schoolteacher and principal about the death of your loved one by suicide, offer them assistance of the Support After Suicide Project
- ask the school to contact your child before they return to school and to ask what your child would like the class to know about the death.

After the funeral:

- discuss how the class can support your child eg. send a card, share a memory, have a memorial activity
- review the plan for the school week
- emphasise the need for as routine a day as possible, allowing flexibility: times to talk about the death and its impact when students need such a discussion

- build in unstructured time during the school day if required
- identify a location and use of a safe room for student (s) who may require additional support.

Grief education:

- your child may have concentration and memory difficulties
- gently encourage them to ask for assistance with schoolwork at this time
- give your child informed choice and multiple options rather than take control
- each person’s response to death needs to be honoured as his or her way of coping in that moment.

Some important ideas to share with a child about grief are:

- there are no right or wrong ways to experience grief
- there is no secret method that will take your grief instantly away
- there are no rules about grief; everyone grieves differently in their own way & in their own time
- there is no timetable for grief
- though it might seem hard to believe, it does gradually get easier to handle
- take all the time and space you need to grieve in your own way for as long as it takes, and keep safe as you go.

Ways to assist a child with grief

- create an opportunity with a significant adult to enhance talking and/or creative expression (eg. art, movement, music, etc.)
- invite peers over, encourage friends to spend time with them and offer support
- suggest they write, draw, paint their thoughts and feelings down
- maybe create something which expresses their feelings
- keep up the team sports or encourage exercising (until you sweat) a couple of times a week
- encourage children to keep a scrapbook, memory box, or special draw/shelf to keep their loved one’s memory alive
- model the above behaviours yourself.

It is particularly important to support those children and young people displaying at-risk behaviours, such as self-harm, expressing thoughts about killing themselves, destroying property or other risk-taking behaviour

If a young person is contemplating suicide it is important they get professional support immediately. This may be a doctor, psychologist, child and adolescent mental health service, kidshelpline, Lifeline.