

Helping Kids Understand Suicide Death and Supporting Their Grief

Be honest and truthful – Dealing with the suicide death of an important person is difficult for the whole family. Although we may feel we are protecting children by telling them a suicide was an accident, children need honest and truthful information about what has happened in order for them to begin to understand and make sense of what they are experiencing. Lying to children can lead to distrust since it's likely they will discover the truth eventually or may even already know more than you think they do. Children need to hear the truth from a caring person they trust as soon as it's possible. They do not necessarily need to be told all the specifics about the suicide and it's okay to say that you can't tell them everything right now, but that one day you will.

Avoid euphemisms – Children, especially young children are very concrete in their thinking. For example, if a child is told that a dead person has “gone to sleep” a child may then believe that when someone goes to sleep or when they go to sleep, they will not wake up. Because death and sleep are very different things, it is important to use honest and truthful language with them so they can begin to understand what death means.

Talk openly about suicide and share information about the mental health conditions that can lead to suicide – Because suicide has been and continues to be stigmatized by society, the pain of a suicide death is furthered by feelings of shame, embarrassment or fear of judgment. Talking openly about the mental health conditions that often lead to suicide will help children to view suicide as resulting from another type of disease that can cause death, like cancer or heart disease, rather than from a criminal or sinful act. Suicide results when a sickness of the brain causes an individual unendurable pain. The sickness impairs the person's ability to see any options to relieve their pain other than dying by suicide. We strongly recommend using language like “died by suicide” or how the person died, “he hung himself” instead of “committed suicide.”

It's okay not to have all the answers – In discussions with children about suicide death, there may be a variety of questions that arise. These can range from questions about why the person died, to the spiritual aspects of death and after death. Part of being honest about death is being honest about the things we don't know and may not ever know. It's okay not to have all the answers. Although we may never know why the person ended their life, it's important for children to know that it was not their fault.

Hold mourning rituals and include children – Many parents are unsure as to whether children should attend funerals, visitations, burials, etc. or whether there should be a service when the deceased died by suicide. No matter what the circumstances of the death were, children need the opportunity to honour the person and to say good-bye to them. Sometimes it's even comforting for children to be able to leave a letter or special object with the person who has died. If unsure whether the child should attend, ask the child and give them the choice of what they want to do. For children who will be attending, help prepare them by providing information about what they might see, who will be there, how people may act (ie. cry, wail, laugh). Have a plan in place for other family members to support and attend to the child during the ritual if needed

Helping Kids to Understand a Suicide Death and Supporting Them in Their Grieving

Grief is a lifelong process - We do not “get over” grief. Grief is something we eventually learn to accept and find a place for in our lives. Children will grieve and re-grieve with each developmental stage, transition, or significant life change. It is not unusual or abnormal to see grief re-surface over time. Children will continue to need support as the death takes on new meaning for them over time.

Children grieve differently from adults – Grief is as unique as we are. There are many factors that influence a person’s grief. Children grieve in their own way too. It’s not at all unusual for a child’s emotions and behavior to be changing minute to minute. Expect and accept a range of emotions and encourage safe and appropriate outlets for expression of emotions. A child’s grief will look different from yours or even that of their siblings. Seek out advice from a professional if you have concerns.

Talk about the person who died – An important part of supporting children in their grieving is talking about and remembering the person who died. When a death occurs by suicide, often the focus remains on the circumstances of the death and how the person died. Children need opportunities to share memories of how the person lived. Although people may avoid talking about the person because they think it will be hard for the child, children actually want to remember and talking about the person allows them to continue to live in their memory.

Create rituals and memorialize – Creating rituals to remember the person who died provide children a way to continue a relationship with their person after death. Although birthdays, anniversaries and holidays/festivals can be especially difficult times for grieving families, they can provide opportunities for rituals of remembrance and discussions about memories of the person who died.

Be aware of the impact of additional losses – Other losses, also known as secondary losses, can compound grief. Some secondary losses include loss of friends, family relationships, loss of school and community, if a move occurs following a death and loss of lifestyle. Other death losses can also occur including loss of a grandparent or loss of a pet. Secondary losses can add challenges and layers to the primary grief. Children need a safe place to openly and honestly express their thoughts, feelings and concerns.

Parents need support too – The best way for parents to support grieving children is to take care of themselves. Taking time to take care of yourself physically, mentally and emotionally will allow you to support and care for your children. This also means allowing yourself to grieve, seeking out and accepting support from others.