



Conversations Matter

when telling a child about a suicide

There has been a death by suicide and I need to inform a child: What do I say? What do I do?

Children can learn about suicide in a range of ways – they may overhear adult conversations, hear about it in the media, or have someone in their family, kinship group or community die by suicide.

When a child needs to be informed of a death, it can be difficult to know what to say and how to explain it.

A first response may be to say nothing or avoid the conversation, but children can realise that something is happening around them even if they do not know exactly what. If the issue is not explained, the child might form the wrong idea.

You may be thinking...

"I can't possibly find the right words to explain this."

"Maybe it would be better not to say anything."

"I don't want them to think it's their fault."

They may be thinking...

"Something bad has happened but no one is talking to me."

"I am worried."

"Maybe I've done something wrong."

This resource provides some basic tips for telling a child about a suicide. It is designed specifically for parents or primary care-givers but the information may be useful for other adults. It is not meant to be comprehensive. If you need further advice or support you can refer to one of the services or resources included at the end of this document.

Things to remember:

- ✓ Tell the child as soon as possible
- ✓ Understand that grief can be different for children
- ✓ Find out what they know about death
- ✓ Tell them about the suicide
- ✓ Keep it simple and use words they will understand
- ✓ Use non-judgemental language
- ✓ It is ok to show emotions
- ✓ Help the child talk to others
- ✓ Look after yourself
- ✓ Learn about other services and resources that are available.

Tell the child as soon as possible

It is preferable to tell the child as soon as possible so they do not have to fill in the gaps on their own.

This should be done by the parent, primary care-giver or delegated to someone the child will trust.

- Children are sensitive to change and will pick up that something is happening in their family or social circle.
- Children may overhear adult conversations and may make up stories to fill the gaps in what they know and understand.
- It is important to be honest with children about the death.
- Children need to know the truth. How this is explained should be appropriate to the individual child's age and developmental ability.
- Prepare by selecting a safe place where the child (and you) will feel comfortable.

Note: It is not advisable to first tell the child about a suicide if you are not the parent or primary care-giver. Instead, make contact with the family to discuss how they would like the situation handled.

Understand that grief may be different for children

Generally, children express grief differently to adults.

- No two children will grieve in the same way. It will depend on their age, their personality, their connection to the person and a range of other factors.
- Children may not want to talk about how they are feeling, but they may express it through behaviour and the way they interact with others.
- For younger children, grief may be expressed through changed sleeping patterns, temper tantrums, worries about being separated from family members, refusing to go to school or through repetitive play.
- For older children they may isolate themselves, have trouble sleeping or fear rejection from friends and family.
- For both younger and older children you may notice that they revert to behaviour more typical of a younger child for a period of time and experience unexplained physical symptoms.
- Grief for children may come and go. At times they may seem not to be affected, but it does not mean they are not feeling the loss.
- Children's responses to grief and loss can also be shaped by those who care for them. It can be helpful to maintain routines and consistent people around them to provide support.
- Ask the child questions to help you understand how they are feeling.

✓ For example:

"Is there anything you want to tell me about what you are thinking or feeling?"

Find out what they know about death

You may need to ask what the child knows about death or what 'being dead' means.

✓ For example, ask:

"Do you know what being dead means?"

- Many children, even young ones, have been exposed to the concept of death through their experiences with pets, through stories, television and a variety of other means. However, misinformation and misunderstanding are common.
- Most children will understand what death means by the age of nine, but some who have already experienced a loss are likely to come to a partial understanding before then.
- It is important for children to understand the following about death:
 - ✓ It is permanent and can't be changed
 - ✓ It means the body stops working
 - ✓ It happens to everyone eventually.

✗ Avoid euphemisms like:

"He's gone to sleep"

"She's gone away"

Tell them about the suicide

Telling a child about a suicide should be done by their parent, guardian or someone they trust.

- Be honest and explain the suicide in ways the child would understand, according to their age.
- You might first want to find out whether they know anything about suicide. Children are not always aware of the word 'suicide' or they may have picked up misunderstandings about it from conversations and media.

✓ Ask:

"Have you heard anything about suicide? What do you think it is?"

Describe what happened in simple language without any extra details.

✓ For example:

"Suicide is when someone makes their body stop working."

"Suicide is the word we use when a person does something to make themselves die."

While it is hard to tell a child about suicide, it is better if the information comes from someone they trust than another source.

You may need to explain why someone (i.e. the person they knew) might take their own life by talking about what they may have been feeling or thinking.

✓ For example:

"People who die by suicide are often very sad and upset. They can get confused and can't find another way to solve their problems."

Explain that it is always best to talk to someone about how they are feeling and that there are always people to go to who can help them with their problems.

Keep it simple and use words the child will understand

Avoid too many details, especially for young children.

- Children tend to ask about what they need to know. You only need to answer what they ask about at the time.
- On the other hand, they may ask a lot of questions or the same question over and over again. Stay calm and answer in a consistent way.
- It is best not to talk to the child about the exact method the person used to take their life. This could be distressing or confusing for a child.

✓ For example you could say:

"They injured their body and it stopped working."

"They took medicines that stopped their heart working."

Use non-judgmental language

While there is no 'right' or 'wrong' when it comes to talking about suicide, be careful that the words you use don't judge the person who died or make suicide seem like a good thing.

- Try to avoid language that criticises the person who died.

X Avoid phrases like:

"She took the easy way out."

"He was selfish."

- In explaining death, adults can sometimes try to make the child feel better and might accidentally make suicide seem like a good thing.
- Avoid language that glamourises suicide or makes it sound like a good outcome.

X Avoid phrases like:

"She is happy now."

"He is in a better place."

"She was too good for this."

It is okay to show emotions

The child needs to know it is okay to express emotions but it is not their job to make things better for other people.

- It is normal for a person bereaved by suicide to explore feelings of confusion or guilt. This may occur for children as well.
- Address any feelings of guilt or blame, and explain that no one is to blame when someone dies by suicide.
- It is okay for children to see you show emotions too.

If you initially did not tell the child about the suicide but told a different story instead, it is not too late to tell the truth.

- Explain that sometimes when adults are upset they can have difficulty talking and you could not find the right words
- Explain to them what happened in simple terms, correcting any misinformation.

Help the child talk to others

Encourage the child to talk about their feelings and worries, either with you or another trusted adult.

- There may be times when the child will benefit from talking to someone else, such as a counsellor or health professional.
- This includes helping them to identify who they could 'share their worries with' such as a grandparent, aunty, uncle or favourite teacher.
- Practice with the child what they might say to friends and others.
- It is also a reality that your child may now expose other children to the concept of death and suicide. Prepare some simple words so that your child can explain what happened to other children.

Do not assume teachers, sporting coaches or others around the child will know what has happened or how to talk about it.

It would be useful to let significant adults know what has happened and how you have explained it to the child so they are prepared if your child raises it.

Look after yourself

Be kind to yourself.

- You will also be affected by the suicide and need support from friends, family or others you can talk to.
- It can be draining to try and manage a child's reaction as well as your own.
- Make sure you monitor your own response and get help if you need it. There are a range of options, including the following:
- Specialist bereavement services (what professionals call 'postvention' services) that can provide practical and emotional support
- Talk to a doctor, other health professional or access a telephone or online counselling service.

Learn about other services and supports

This resource is a basic introduction to what you can say or do if you need to inform a child of a death by suicide. There are a range of other services and resources that can assist.

Take a look at the links on the next page, or on the **Conversations Matter** website, for further information – www.conversationsmatter.com.au

Services and supports

Kids Helpline

Free confidential 24-hour telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged 5 to 25 years - 1800 55 1800

Websites offering information, stories, online activities and online counselling.

For kids: www.kidshelpline.com.au/kids

For teenagers and young adults: www.kidshelpline.com.au/teens

Lifeline

A 24-hour national telephone crisis counselling service – 13 11 14

Online counselling service, further information and service finder – www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service

24-hour national telephone counselling service to people 18 years and over who are suicidal or bereaved by suicide - 1300 659 467

Online counselling service, grief and loss program and resources about bereavement - www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

StandBy - Support after Suicide

24-hour coordinated community response service to families, friends and communities who have been bereaved through suicide – www.standbysupport.com.au

Support After Suicide

Information resources and group support for those bereaved by suicide – www.supportaftersuicide.org.au

Other useful resources

Care and Support Pack for Family and Friends Bereaved by Suicide (NSW) – Resource

www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2007/care_support_pack.html

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

The largest provider of grief and bereavement education in Australia – www.grief.org.au

For a more comprehensive list of links refer to the 'Supporting Information' section at

www.conversationsmatter.com.au



This work is copyright. It may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgement of the source. It may not be reproduced for commercial usage or sale. Reproduction for purposes other than those indicated above requires written permission from the NSW Ministry of Health.

© NSW Ministry of Health 2013



Health



EVERYMIND



Mental
Health
Commission
of New South Wales