



How to Talk to Children When Someone They Love Has Died From Suicide

Talking to a child about suicide is one of the hardest things you may ever do. It is normal to feel uncomfortable. Everyone feels unprepared, uneasy, and anxious telling a child that someone they love has died from suicide. As loving people, we want to protect children from pain. Unfortunately, we cannot avoid talking about an event that will impact their life. As adults, we can be supportive in helping children to experience life naturally, and we can lead them in positive directions.

Basics to remember when talking to children about someone special who has died from suicide:

- They want to know that their feelings are ok no matter what they are.
- They want to feel loved and valued above all else.
- They want to feel protected, and that no one else is leaving them or will die *right now*.
- They want to know that nothing they did, said, or thought caused this.

“I know I have to tell them that this person died, but should I tell them the truth, that the person died from ending their own life?”

Some adults are hesitant to tell children that someone has died from suicide because they want to protect children from painful feelings. This is a very understandable concern, because of the stigma associated with suicide in our culture. It is, of course, always a personal choice to give other reasons for the cause of death. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that when adults hide the truth in an effort to protect children, the children often see and hear information from other sources, such as a clipping from the newspaper, or an overheard conversation, from a neighbor, a relative, or another child who lets the “cat out of the bag”. One way to have better control over information is to tell children the truth yourself.

Remember that what a child perceives may actually be scarier for them than the truth itself. On the other hand, it is good idea to refrain from describing graphic or disturbing details that the child is unaware of. But, the truth can be talked about in ways that are open and honest, as well as protective. Children will follow your lead. If you are open and honest with them, you are teaching them that they can be the same with you. As a result, they will be prepared when others talk about what happened, and you and your child will develop a more trusting relationship.

“What do I say? How do I talk about it?”

This will depend on the child’s age. Find a private, comfortable place. Use words that are understandable for their age. If possible, ask for help from a supportive family member, friend, or grief counselor beforehand for advice. Consider what the child may already know or may have experienced (if they witnessed the police in the home, for example). Understanding their personal experience can guide you in helping the child open up about what happened and what he or she knows.

Give children opportunities to ask questions. Ask them what they would like to do after talking together. They may want to talk more, stay close to a relative, play, or get some emotional distance from the events. Follow the child’s lead. Observe their body language. Remember that everyone grieves differently and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. There are no right or wrong feelings to have. All feelings or reactions are normal *for them*. Some children need to be involved and want a lot of information; other children may not want to be involved and want very little information. It is ok to ask them if they would like to talk about it more. Whenever possible, it is always best to be a good listener and let them talk and ask questions. Do your best to be available to talk about what happened, and let them choose their *own* way of coping and grieving. It is also okay to not know what to say or do. Be honest with children and say “*I don’t know.*” Let

them know that although you may not have answers to all of their questions right now, you will do your best to learn.

It is very important to draw attention to the person's life *before* the death. Suicide is the *cause of death*, but it is *not* who the person was to the child while they were alive. Talk about memories and what that person meant while they were alive, because this is what will be left for the child to remember in the years to come.

“What do I say when a child asks ‘why’ someone ended their own life?”

You could respond in any way that feels the most comforting for you and your child. You can tell a child that “*we may never know why.*” You could say that the person “*did not want to die, but was not thinking clearly at the moment,*” or “*was not thinking in the right way, at that time.*” You could also say that the person “*was not himself or herself*” and “*didn’t mean for it to happen.*” If the child is very young and still does not understand, you could say that the person’s “*brain was not working.*”

If you prefer, you can also say that the person who died “*had a lot of adult problems and adult stress, and did not reach out to others for help. It is always important to reach out for help when problems get very big. All problems get fixed over time.*”

You can also say that the person “*made a mistake, or a wrong choice, because there is always another way out.*” Another important response is that “*all problems are temporary, not permanent, and that problems can always be made better.*” What is most important is that the child knows that “*it is no one’s fault*”, and there are always ways to make things better.

“What do I tell people who ask what happened? How do I guide a child about how to respond to other people’s questions?”

Suicide carries a social stigma that we cannot ignore. Who you choose to tell and not tell is something that may concern you. Remember that if you choose to not tell some people, it is *not* because you should feel embarrassed or ashamed, but rather a reflection of cultural misunderstandings about suicide and what it is like to be a survivor of a suicide. Let your child know that some people might ask what happened, and they should have a prepared response for those who are not in their close-knit circle. The child should know that others may be judgmental, or say something hurtful, and it may be helpful for them to seek out reassuring and comforting people. Ask your child for suggestions and try to come up with some responses together that are the most comforting. This may ease the burden of your child feeling unprepared and put on the spot. Being prepared will help them feel confident that they are not “lying” or attracting more attention to what happened. They are instead making their own choices about what to share about their life.

“I feel like people will blame me for what happened. I can’t help but blame myself.”

Your child may feel similarly. People experience a variety of feelings when something this traumatic happens. Remember your feelings are normal. No matter what the cause of death, guilt is one of many feelings that most people have. It is natural to feel like we could have prevented something terrible from happening. It is important to accept the fact that there are things in life that are out of our control. Feeling like we are somewhat responsible for someone’s death is normal, but not logical. Get support from those who will remind you that no one is to blame. And, be sure to give children the same reassurance that what happened had *absolutely* nothing to do with them, just as it had nothing to do with you.

If I tell them what happened, will that mean that my child might try to do the same thing?”

Scientific research has shown that although there is *sometimes* a family connection, most all people who have a family history of suicide *do not go on to do the same thing*. It is important to remember that people do not die from suicide because they honestly expressed their feelings. People die from suicide because they *did not* express their feelings in open and constructive ways. Openness is important because everyone in life has, at some point, experienced desperation or vulnerability. It is important to teach children that it is ok to talk about their feelings, that all feelings are ok, and they can find support when needed. It is best to have a calm non-judgmental attitude when talking about these issues, so that a child will feel more comfortable expressing his or her own feelings. Assisting your child in expressing their feelings honestly will allow you to offer comfort or acceptance for their feelings (no matter what they are).

“Is there any good that can come from this?”

Absolutely. You can become closer as a family or as friends. Your child will look to you for guidance as a role model, and you will be able to model love and support for them. You can have a more open and supportive life with your children. Events like these force us to find ways to take care of each other and ourselves in ways that may not have ever been asked of us before. If such a tragic situation can teach us anything, it is that it is important to reach out to each other and share our feelings in safe accepting environments.

“What can I do for my children over time, after we have initially talked about what has happened?”

You have already begun to help your child for the future by initiating an open relationship with him or her right now. You can also encourage children to express their feelings through art, drawing, books, writing, and playing (depending on their age and interests). It is common for children to retell what happened to them, or they may draw or play in ways that reenact traumatic events. This is often useful for children for expressing themselves and creating an opportunity for others to talk with them about their feelings.

It is also a good idea to check in with them as time goes by. As they get older, they will probably think differently about the suicide. Offer to talk about their changing feelings. Professional grief counseling is also available in most communities. Contact a local grief counselor, Hospice, or other bereavement service to help cope with feelings of loss after a death.

Look for opportunities for your child to meet other children or families who have also experienced a traumatic death. Because suicide has a cultural stigma attached to it, families may feel very alone, different, and isolated. Feeling isolated is why it is *especially* important for survivors to feel normal and a part of social groups. Support groups can help reduce the sense of isolation.

Knowing that they (and you) are not alone can be one of the most healing gifts you can give your child, yourself, and others in the community. Remember that you can help others when they also know that they are not alone.

Review of ideas:

- Help the child feel safe, protected, loved, and that others they love are not going anywhere *right now*.
- Openness and honesty should protect the child when others talk (to them or near them) about what happened.
- Openness to questions and honesty teaches children that it is ok to talk about the suicide.

- All feelings are “ok.” There are no wrong feelings.
- Everyone grieves differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Allow children to choose their style of grieving.
- Let children know that you are listening to them and are interested in anything they have to say or want to do.
- Remember the person who died primarily for who they were, not for their cause of death.
- Remind the child and yourself, over and over, that no one is to blame for what happened.
- Prepare your child for other people’s questions.
- Find ways to help the child feel connected to others to reduce feelings of isolation.
- Build on your closeness and support for each other.
- Encourage art, play, or writing for expressing feelings.
- Seek out support from a family grief counselor or others who have gone through similar experiences.