



Caring, Support, Awareness, Education
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Helping children grieve

Children grieve in complex ways, just as adults do. Children feel hurt and sorrow when they lose someone they love, just as adults do.

However, children often do **not** have the language to express their feelings of grief or the level of understanding of death to help them cope with the grieving process, as adults do.

Children can become confused with their own feelings, especially because they often do not understand that grief and pain will subside with time and support.

Children will be better able to deal with the death of a loved one, if they are:

- Allowed to grieve in their own way
- Listened to and encouraged gently to discuss their feelings
- Given space and time to comprehend and process what has happened
- Spoken to about death in a respectful, honest and open manner, in language they can understand
- Able to observe other people grieving and talking about their feelings
- Able to maintain fairly regular routines so they feel secure and settled.

Children and suicide grief

When children lose someone close to them to suicide, it can make their recovery journey more painful, complicated and protracted than with other deaths because:

- Suicide is often sudden and unexpected
- Suicide is less likely to be a topic the child is familiar with or has even heard of before
- Suicide still carries a social stigma which can make children feel embarrassed, ostracized and isolated

Should I tell the child it was a 'suicide'?

Although it can produce anxiety and fear to discuss suicide with children, it can produce confusion and resentment for children to only find out about a suicide at a much later date.

There are a number of reasons to be upfront about suicide with children:

- Children are sensitive and perceptive, and will be able to feel that something is happening within their family that they are not being told
- Children may be told the truth about the suicide by school mates or neighbours, which can lead to confusion and feelings of betrayal. Also the language used by non-family members may not be ideal or appropriate for your child
- Knowing how someone close to you died is an important part of the grief journey, and not knowing can have long-term negative effects on the child's healing
- The child's trust and value of the truth can be negatively affected by having trusted family members telling them half-truths or made-up events
- It dispels myths surrounding suicide and gives the child a greater understanding of suicide and aids prevention

It can be a great relief to tell children the truth about a suicide death. After a death there is often already much anxiety and stress within the family, by removing the 'secret of suicide', the family can begin to heal all together.

Children often have little experience with the terms 'suicide' or 'death' and will take the news in a very matter-of-fact way. They will often be satisfied with a very simple explanation.

Children attending the funeral

Give your child choices about attending the funeral, but also give your child enough information to make that choice.

Tell the child what will happen during the funeral. They may never have been to a funeral before and it can be confusing.

Let them know that you and their family/friends will be there with them during the funeral.

Give them the choice of viewing or not viewing the deceased, if this is possible.

If they want to, let the child be involved in the service by:

- Helping to select the casket, grave marker, burial site, urn, place to spread the ashes etc.
- Helping to choose clothes for the deceased to wear
- Making or choosing special items to put in the casket
- Helping to choose music, flowers, poems and photos for the service
- For older children, helping to carry the casket.

By attending the funeral, children are able to actively start the grieving process. They are able to observe other people mourning and comforting one another, honouring the deceased person and saying goodbye.

Excluding children from the funeral against their wishes can lead to feelings of regret, frustration, anger and hurt.

If you feel that you will be too overwhelmed with your own grief to support the child during the funeral, ensure there is someone less affected (e.g. neighbor, teacher etc.) by grief to support your child.

Things to remember when talking to grieving children

- Try to be age appropriate in your use of words. A teenager will have a better understanding of the word 'suicide' than a pre-teen. A toddler and young child will likely have no understanding of the word 'suicide' or even 'death'.
- Honest is best, within reason. Children do not need to know methods of death, or negative judgments of the deceased. A simple explanation of the truth is all that is needed.
- Use clear language such as the word 'death' instead of 'passed away' or 'gone to a better place' as these phrases can be confusing and misleading to children who may think the deceased will be coming back
- Reassure the child that they are loved, and that the death was not their fault. Reassure them that the deceased person loved them very much.
- Model appropriate expressions of feelings and thoughts.
- It may be helpful for children to see adults cry, but be careful not to do all of your grieving in front of children as it can become overwhelming for them.
- Re-tell happy memories of the deceased person.
- If religion is important in your life, share your beliefs and faith with your child.
- Dispel any myths the child may have heard about suicide.
- Remind the child that if they are very sad, they should talk to somebody and not consider suicide as an option, there is always help available.
- Reassure them that they can talk about the death and their feelings whenever they want to.

Common reactions of grieving children

These reactions are 'normal', and are a way that children work through their grief and begin to heal. As with adults, children will not complete their grieving in a few weeks or months, all grieving takes time and sometimes they may appear to be coping well and then may appear to regress again. This is a normal part of grieving.

- Initially there may be shock; difficulty/fast breathing, weak limbs, nausea, sudden intake of breath, intense crying, feeling of things being unreal.
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Lack of appetite or wanting to eat at inappropriate times
- Being clingy, wanting to always be with someone
- Feeling lost, aimless, unconnected to reality
- Difficulty staying focused and making decisions
- Being very angry, either with the deceased person or in general. Temper tantrums for younger children
- Feeling that something they did or did not do caused their loved one to die
- Being tearful at random times
- Being worried about their own health, or the health of other family members

- Suffering headaches, stomach aches, rashes, bladder/bowel upsets etc.
- At times appearing to be unconcerned or unfeeling about the loss. Children often can't maintain the same intensity of emotions for long periods of time as adults do
- Not wanting to go back to school / kindergarten etc.
- Difficulty maintaining friendships
- Dreaming of the deceased
- Talking about the deceased and the funeral
- Reverting to more childish behavior and wanting to be babied
- Feeling they need to be brave and look after their parent or younger siblings
- For older children, they may confide their feelings and concerns with someone outside of their family
- School work may be negatively affected
- Not wanting to be happy because they feel they are betraying the deceased person
- Asking lots of questions about death and dying
- Playing games involving death or violence

Examples of conversations

For the purposes of this table, 'brother' has been used as an example of a lost loved one. Any relative / friend can be substituted.

Younger children	Possible questions	Suggested answers
	What does 'dead' mean?	'Dead' means that there is no more life in the body. The body has stopped working which means the heart doesn't beat and they are not breathing anymore.
	Is 'dead' like sleeping?	No, 'dead' is not like sleeping.
	Is 'dead' like going away on a trip?	No, 'dead' is not like going away on a trip,
	Is my brother coming back?	No, your brother is not coming back.
	Why did my brother die?	Your brother was very sick. He was so sick that the doctors couldn't fix him Or Your brother was feeling very sad and lonely and he thought that the only way to stop feeling sad was to make his body stop working, but he didn't tell anyone about it. It is very important to tell someone when you are feeling so sad.
	Will my brother be buried / cremated?	Yes, and we will be able to visit the grave / ashes whenever we want to.
	What is suicide?	Suicide means someone makes their body stop working. It means someone has made themselves die / they have killed themselves.
	Why didn't someone help him?	Your brother didn't tell anyone how bad he was feeling. His thoughts were telling him that there was no one to help him, but that wasn't true. There is always someone to talk to and help you. You must remember to tell someone when you are feeling that sad or worried.

QLD Helplines

Standby Brisbane 07 3250 1856
Standby Response Service 0438 150 180
(24 hour mobile crisis response to suicide bereavement)
Sunshine and Cooloola Coasts 0407 766 961

National Helplines

LifeLine: 13 11 14 (24 hour)
Mensline: 1300 789 978 (24 hour)
Suicide Callback Line: 1300 659 467 (24 hour)
National Hope Line: 1300 467 354 (24 hour bereavement support)
Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636
Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800 (24 hour)
SANE Helpline: 1800 18 SANE (M-F 9am-5pm)

Photo by Pia Koskelainen