



WinterSpring

Facing Loss, Embracing Life Again -- Together

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Suicide Death and Your Kids

Adapted from resources at the Dougy Center and the WinterSpring experience

Whether it's a family member or someone you and your children know in the community, a death by suicide can be very difficult to navigate. Remember that grieving takes time. Please call us if you need additional help.

1. **Be honest.** With access to social media, it's easy for kids to get information from other sources about a suicide death. As adults, you build trust by telling the truth. They don't necessarily need to know every single fact about a death, but they do need to hear truthful answers and information. Start with a short explanation of what has happened, and let their questions guide how much detail you provide.
 - a. Share information about depression and mental illness. Suicide is not usually a random act; it occurs in a context. Although no one knows what causes suicide, most people who die of suicide have experienced some form of depression or mental illness. It helps children to know that the person who died was in fact suffering from a kind of illness in his or her thinking.
 - b. Sometimes families choose not to divulge whether a death is suicide, such as the suicide of a teen, yet we often find that rumors spread. Thus, you can let them know that you don't know for sure whether it was suicide, and continue to talk openly about suicide.
2. **Expect and accept their range of feelings.** Feelings and grief reactions are influenced by many factors, including the age, personality and developmental level of the child. You may see a broad spectrum of emotions in children and teens, including anger, frustration, guilt, numbness, shock, sadness, relief, confusion, shame, fear, loneliness and embarrassment. Sleep problems, changes in eating, and acting out are common.
3. **Help break the stigma.** Our society continues to stigmatize suicide, as well as the families of those left behind. It is often an uncomfortable and shocking topic that can leave people unsure of what to say. In light of this challenge, it is critical that kids have safe places where they can talk openly about the death without judgement and awkwardness, with you, with a counselor, and/or in a support group.
4. **Talk about and remember the person who died.** Don't be afraid to talk about and remember the person who died. Kids benefit from sharing memories.
 - a. Remember that people are complex, and for some kids, the person who died may have let them down in some way. It's OK to share negative memories, too. Provide a safe space for this type of sharing, because it will help release difficult emotions; sometimes this release opens up the way for deeper feelings of sadness.
5. **Be prepared for fears.** After a suicide death, children may have fears and bad dreams. During these times, it is helpful for trusted adults to stay connected and listen to their questions and concerns. Offer reassurance without making promises. You can say, "I'll do everything I can to keep myself and those we love safe."
6. **Provide outlets for play, physical activity, art.** Play is a natural outlet of expression for children. While adults tend to talk out (or hold in) their grief, children are more likely to express it through play. This is one way you can validate their experiences and help them regain a sense of balance and control. If you play with them, reflect back what you see and hear, without judgment. And exercise can help release deep emotions.
7. **Respect differences in grieving styles.** Children's grieving styles, even in the same family, can be very different. Some kids want to talk about the death, while others want to be left alone. Recognizing and respecting that each person grieves in his or her own way is essential. Provide an "altar" place in your home where the children can see pictures of the loved one, and express grief by drawing a picture or writing something. Children grieve in doses, so giving them a place to express on their own time is helpful.
8. **Hold a memorial service.** No matter how difficult or painful the deceased person's life or death may have been, grieving children and teens need the opportunity to honor the person's life and say goodbye.
9. **Inform the child's school about the death.** Children spend a lot of time in school and a death affects not only family life but school life. That is why it's important to inform a child's teacher, counselor, coaches, and any adult support person in the school setting about the death. Talk with your child about what they would like in terms of sharing the news with their classmates and others in the school.