

## Helping Children Through A Suicide Death

Children often get brushed aside unintentionally as adults try to work through their own grief. Please keep in mind that children have the same emotional needs as adults, which can be compounded by unspoken fears. Communication is very important. Lack of communication = vivid imagination!

\* Tell all your children about the suicide, even the youngest ones. Compassionately give them correct facts about the suicide. To avoid harmful answers they may come up with themselves, make sure its clear and they understand. But don't give them more details than they need.

\* Always be honest with them! If you aren't honest now, in time the truth always seems to surface, and they will have to begin the healing process all over again. In addition, most feel betrayed by the one that 'lied' to (withheld facts from) them, causing additional anger and trust issues. I've never heard of a case where the child later felt like someone was "protecting" them. They resent it! I can't tell you how many moms have disagreed with me on this and then came back later regretting their choice and asking me to please never stop encouraging parents to be honest.

\* Be direct, using correct words. Say "dead" or "died." Don't use words that may cause them confusion. Children are not able to generalize words such as "sleeping," "gone," or "lost." They will believe that the person is sleeping, lost or gone for a while, all of which imply that the person will return. Telling a child "God took them" can instill a fear that maybe God will come take them also, so please choose correct verbiage.

\* Listen carefully to all their questions, and then answer truthfully. Remain consistent in your truthful answers about the suicide. Do not give long explanations or too many details. Give the facts, wait for questions. If you don't know the answers, don't guess or make something up. Admit that you don't know, but you will try to find out, and follow through. Be prepared to explain more than once as they process the information and have more questions.

\* Return to a normal schedule and routine as soon as possible. Children need the security of 'normal.' Don't expect them to be adults and understand things they can't, such as your pain. You are the one they look to for support and security. They need that to continue.

\* Allow each family member to work through this in his/her own individual way. Don't ask young children to be grown up and take on adult responsibilities and behaviors. Be very generous with hugs and comforting words. If you shun them because of your own pain, they may feel 'blamed' for the death.

\* Try to find out what the children are thinking by asking them what they have heard and what they think has happened. The biggest questions they need answered right now are: Am I to blame? Will it happen to me? Does this mean they didn't love me? Make sure they know it is not contagious. They will not catch it and neither will you.

\* Discuss the procedures that surround the death, such as the wake, funeral, memorial service, burial, cremation, and visitation. Explain what will happen and give the child an opportunity to participate in ways that may be healing to them... i.e. Teens may wish to pick out some of the music.

\* Talk about the deceased family member, share memories. However, do not force the subject. Teens tend to avoid conversations about the deceased.

\* Offer books to help open conversations and bring more understanding to where they are in their grief. There is a great booklist on [www.road2healing.com/booksC.html](http://www.road2healing.com/booksC.html). These books start at storybook level and go through young adults. There are also books to help caretakers walk them through the grief. Be aware that teens may read the books, but still may not want to discuss the issues. The books will help them even if they don't talk about it.

- \* They may be having guilt feelings. Assure them that the suicide was not their fault, and that suicide is not about how much they loved us. It's about how much (little) they loved themselves & hopelessness.
- \* Encourage your children to share their grief with you, clergy, school counselors and trusted friends. However, teach them to be selective about sharing the facts of the suicide with others.
- \* Let children see you cry, and cry with them. This will be healing and show them that crying is an acceptable and natural release for grief. Let them know that your tears are not related to them. You are mourning the loss of the loved one.
- \* Teach your children to make good choices in life, and discuss constructive ways of handling problems. Problems can be solved, and they can choose to build happy, well-adjusted lives. Teach them that suicide is not an option- there are other solutions.

This is my very strong personal opinion I am adding - I am totally against telling children, or other family members, that the deceased was "sick" or "couldn't help it." They may feel overwhelmed and decide that they are also 'sick' and suicide is an OK option if life gets hard. After all, they "can't help it" either.



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