

Explaining Suicide to Children

"What should I tell the children?"

A question often asked after the suicide of a loved one. The answer: **the truth**, regardless of how difficult it may be.

Many people still believe it is best to shield children from the truth, that somehow this will protect them. More often than not, the opposite is true. Misleading children, evading the truth, or telling falsehoods to them about how someone died can do much more harm than good. If they happen to hear the truth from someone else, their trust in you can be difficult to regain. Not knowing can be terrifying and hurtful, and the stories children make up to fill in the gaps in their knowledge are often scary and painful. We've always been told that "honesty is the best policy" and just because the subject is suicide, that doesn't mean this time is any different.



What children might be feeling after losing someone they love to suicide:

- Abandoned that person who died didn't love them.
- Feel the death is their fault if they would have loved the person more.
- Afraid that they will die too.
- Worried that someone else they love will die or worry about who will take care of them.
- Guilt.
- Sad.
- Embarrassed to see other people or go back to school.
- Confused.
- Angry with the person who died, at God, at everyone.
- Lonely.
- Denial pretend like nothing happened.
- Numb can't feel anything.
- Wish it would all just go away.

Children and adolescents may have a multitude of feelings happening at the same time or simply may not feel anything at all. Whatever they are feeling, the important thing to remember is that they understand it is okay; that whatever those feelings are, they have permission to let them out and that you are there for them when needed. Explain to your child that what they are feeling is normal. If they want to keep them to themselves for a while, that's okay too. Consider a children's bereavement group to help them connect with peers and understand the situation fully. This allows the child to connect with other peers that are struggling with similar situations.

How do we explain suicide to children or young people?

It may seem impossible and too complex to even try, but that's exactly what we must do - try! Their age will be a factor in how much they can understand and how much information you give them. Some children will be content with an answer consisting of one or two sentences; others might have continuous questions, which they should be allowed to ask and to have answered.

After children learn that the death was by suicide, one of their first questions might be, "What is suicide?" Explain that people die in different ways - some die from cancer, from heart attacks, some from car accidents, and that suicide means that a person did it to him or herself. If they ask how, once again it will be difficult, but be honest. Be prepared to talk about suicide multiple times during the first few weeks. They may not be able to have a sustained conversation, so do not prolong it once they are ready to move on. It is also important to encourage questions so that the child is capable of understanding the situation. Let the child lead the conversation by asking questions. And take time to ask them questions like "what do you think happened." This will give you insight into what your child believes about what happened and what they are developmentally ready to hear. (over)

If someone the child knows, or the child herself, is being treated for depression, it's critical to stress that only *some* people die from depression, not everyone that has depression. And that there are many options for getting help, e.g. medication, psychotherapy.

Some examples of explaining why suicide happens might be:

"He had an illness in his brain and he died."

"His brain got very sick and he died."

"The brain is an organ of the body just like the heart, liver and kidneys. Sometimes it can get sick, just like other organs."

A more detailed explanation might be:

"Our thoughts and feelings come from our brain, and sometimes a person's brain can get very sick - the sickness can cause a person to feel very badly inside. It also makes a person's thoughts get all jumbled and mixed up, so he can't think clearly. Some people can't think of any other way of stopping the hurt they feel inside. They don't understand that they don't have to feel that way, that they can get help."

It's important to note that there are people who were getting help for their depression and died anyway. Just as in other illnesses, a person can receive the best medical treatment and still not survive. This can also be the case with depression. If this is what occurred in your family, children and adolescents can usually understand the analogy above when it is explained to them.

Children need to know that the person who died loved them, but that because of the illness, the person may have been unable to convey that to them or think about how the children would feel after the loved one's death. They need to know that the suicide was not their fault, and that nothing they said or did or didn't say or do, caused the death.

Some children might ask questions related to the morals of suicide - good/bad, right/wrong. It is best to steer clear of this, if possible. Suicide is none of these - it is something that happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with that pain.

Whatever approach is taken when explaining suicide to children, they need to know they can talk about it and ask questions whenever they feel the need, to know that there are people there who will listen. They need to know that they won't always feel the way they do now, that things will get better, and that they will be loved and taken care of no matter what.

Suggested Reading:

Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide

by Linda Goldman, M.S.

Child Survivors of Suicide: A Book for Those Who Care For Them

by Rebecca Parkin with Karen Dunne-Maxim

When Dinosaurs Die - A Guide to Understanding Death

by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown

The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide

by Helen Fitzgerald

Talking About Death: A Dialogue between Parent & Child

by Earl A. Grollman

Suicide Survivors Club

by Laurie Phillips

Suggested Resources:

Coping with the Loss of a Friend or Loved One Booklet

A recently revised 23-page booklet that contains useful information for those who have suffered the loss of a friend or loved one to suicide. Visit www.save.org/shop-save/

The Dougy Center | www.dougy.org

The Dougy Center provides a safe place for children, teens, young adults and their families who are grieving a death to share their experiences through peer support groups, education, and training.