

Talking to Children about Suicide

From Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, SAVE.org

What children might feel after losing someone they love to suicide:

- Abandoned - that the person who died didn't love them.
- Feel the death is their fault - if they would have loved the person more or behaved differently.
- Afraid that they will die too.
- Worried that someone else they love will die or worry about who will take care of them.
- Guilt - because they wished or thought of the person's death.
- Sad.
- Embarrassed - to see other people or to 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.

A child or adolescent may have a many mixed feelings or may feel "numb." Whatever they are feeling, remember your role as an adult is to help them and be supportive. Reassure the child whatever feelings they might experience; they have permission to let them out. If they want to keep to themselves for a while, let them. Don't tell a child how they should or should not feel. Also, don't discourage them from expressing negative emotions like anger.

How do we explain suicide to children or young people?

Age is a factor in understanding the type and amount of information to provide. Some children you can talk to about suicide with a 1- or 2-sentence answer; others might have continuous questions which they should be allowed to ask and to have answered. The most important thing to remember is to be honest. Children will always find out about what happened at some point, so be honest.

When a child hears that someone "committed suicide" or died of suicide, one of their first questions might be, "What is suicide?" One way to explain is that people die in different ways - from cancer, heart attacks, car accidents, or old age for example. Suicide simply means that a person caused his or her own death intentionally, it doesn't have to mean more than that. However, also explaining that the person they loved caused their own death because they had an illness in their brain can also be helpful. If they press for more detail, use your discretion to help the child understand as much as is age appropriate.

Some examples of explaining why suicide happens might be:

- "He had an illness in his brain (or mind) and he died."
- "Her brain got very sick and she 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."
- "She had an illness called depression and it caused her to die."

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. Remind her there are many options for getting help, like medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of both.

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 sometimes they 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 available and still not survive. This can also be the case with depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

A child needs to understand that the person who died loved them, but that because of the illness he or she may have been unable to convey that or to think about how the child would feel after the death. The child needs 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. They need to understand they won't always feel the way they do now, that things will get better, and that they'll be loved and taken care of no matter what.

Suggested Reading for Kids

- [*Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide*](#) by Linda Goldman, M.S.
- [*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