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National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Talking to Children after a Suicide

Talking to a child about suicide is one of the hardest things you may ever do. It is normal to feel uncomfortable. Everyone feels unprepared, uneasy, and anxious telling children that someone has died from suicide. As loving people, we want to protect children from pain. Unfortunately, we cannot avoid talking about an event that will impact their life. As adults, we can be supportive in helping children to experience life naturally, and we can lead them in positive directions.

Basics to remember when talking to children about someone special who has died from suicide:

- They want to know that their feelings are okay no matter what they are.
- They want to feel loved and valued above all else.
- They want to feel protected and that no one else is leaving them or will die right now.
- They want to know that nothing they did, said, or thought caused this

“I know I have to tell them that this person died, but should I tell them the truth, that the person died from ending his or her own life?”

Some adults are hesitant to tell children that someone has died from suicide because they want to protect children from painful feelings. This is a very understandable concern because of the stigma associated with suicide in our culture. It is, of course, always a personal choice to give other reasons for the cause of death. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that when adults hide the truth in an effort to protect children, the children often see and hear information from other sources, such as a clipping from the newspaper, or an overheard conversation, from a neighbor, a relative, or another child who lets the “cat out of the bag.” One way to have better control over information is to tell children the truth yourself.

Remember that what a child perceives actually may be scarier for them than the truth itself. On the other hand, it is a good idea to refrain from describing graphic or disturbing details that the child is unaware of. But the truth can be talked about in ways that are open and honest, as well as protective. Children will follow your lead. If you are open and honest with them, you are teaching them that they can be the same with you. As a result, they will be prepared when others talk about what happened, and you and your child will develop a more trusting relationship.

“What do I say? How do I talk about it?”

This will depend on the child's age. Find a private, comfortable place. Use words that are understandable for their age. If possible, ask for help from a supportive family member, friend, or grief counselor beforehand for advice. Consider what the child already may know or may have experienced (if he or she witnessed the police in the home, for example). Understanding their personal experience can guide you in helping the child open up about what happened and what he or she knows.

Give children opportunities to ask questions. Ask them what they would like to do after talking together. They may want to talk more, stay close to a relative, play, or get some emotional distance from the events. Follow the child's lead. Observe their body language. Remember that everyone grieves differently and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. There are no right or wrong feelings to have. All feelings or reactions are normal *for them*. Some children need to be involved and want a lot of information; other children may not want to be involved and want very little information.

It is okay to ask them if they would like to talk about it more. Whenever possible, it is always best to be a good listener and let them talk and ask questions. Do your best to be available to talk about what happened, and let them choose their own way of coping and grieving.

It also is okay to not know what to say or do. Be honest with children and say, *"I don't know."* Let them know that although you may not have answers to all of their questions right now, you will do your best to learn.

It is very important to draw attention to the person's life *before* the death. Suicide is the *cause of death*, but it is *not* who the person was to the child while they were alive. Talk about memories and what that person meant while they were alive, because this is what will be left for the child to remember in the years to come.

"What do I say when a child asks 'why' someone ended his or her own life?"

You could respond in any way that feels the most comforting for you and your child. You can tell a child *"we may never know why."* You could say that the person *"did not want to die, but was not thinking clearly at the moment,"* or *"was not thinking in the right way, at that time."* If the child is very young and still does not understand, you could say that the person's "brain was not working."

You also can say that the person *"made a mistake, or a wrong choice, because there is always another way out."* Another important response is that *"all problems are temporary, not permanent, and that problems can always be made better."* What is most important is that the child knows that *"it is no one's fault,"* and there always are ways to make things better.

"If I tell them what happened, will that mean that my child might try to do the same thing?"

Scientific research has shown that although there is *sometimes* a family connection, most people who have a family history of suicide *do not go on to do the same thing*. It is important to remember that people do not die from suicide because they honestly expressed their feelings. People die from suicide because they *did not* express their feelings in open and constructive ways. Openness is important because everyone in life has, at some point, experienced desperation or vulnerability.

It is important to teach children that it is okay to talk about their feelings, that all feelings are okay, and they can find support when needed. It is best to have a calm non-judgmental attitude when talking about these issues, so that a child will feel more comfortable expressing his or her own feelings. Assisting your child in expressing his or her feelings honestly will allow you to offer comfort or acceptance for his or her feelings (no matter what they are).

"What can I do for my children over time, after we have initially talked about what has happened?"

You have already begun to help your child for the future by initiating an open relationship with him or her right now. You also can encourage children to express their feelings through art, drawing, books, writing, and playing (depending on their age and interests). It is common for children to retell what happened to them, or they may draw or play in ways that reenact traumatic events. This is often useful for children for expressing themselves and creating an opportunity for others to talk with them about their feelings.

It is also a good idea to check in with them as time goes by. As they get older, they will probably think differently about the suicide. Offer to talk about their changing feelings. Professional grief counseling also is available in most communities. Contact a local grief counselor, hospice, or other bereavement services to help cope with feelings of loss after a death.

About the Author

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