



WHEN A LOVED ONE DIES BY SUICIDE

*Helping Children Understand a Suicide Death With
Honesty, Care, and Age-Appropriate Language*

When a loved one dies by suicide, adults often struggle with what to tell a child. The circumstances may feel frightening, complicated, or difficult to explain while the adults themselves are grieving. Children generally benefit from truthful, age-appropriate information, protection from graphic details, reassurance that they did not cause the death, and an ongoing invitation to ask questions.

USE HONEST, DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Avoid creating a false story that may later be discovered. Begin with the fact that the person died. Depending on the child's age and understanding, explain that the person caused their own death. More detail can be added gradually as the child asks questions and matures.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Repeated questions about why the person died or whether someone could have stopped it.
- Guilt about an argument, something the child said, or not recognizing that the person was struggling.
- Fear that another loved one - or the child themselves - could suddenly die in the same way.

GENTLE REMINDER

A child should hear clearly and repeatedly: “You did not cause this death, and it was never your responsibility to prevent it.”

KEEP THE EXPLANATION SIMPLE AND SAFE

For a younger child, language may be as simple as: “Uncle Mark died. He caused his own body to stop working. His thinking was not helping him understand that there were other ways to get through what he was feeling.” Avoid graphic descriptions of the method.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Say clearly: “You did not cause this.” “Nothing you said, thought, or did made this happen.” “It was an adult problem, and it was never your job to fix it.” If you do not know why the person died by suicide, it is appropriate to say that you do not know every reason.

AVOID SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS FOR A COMPLEX DEATH

Suicide rarely has one simple explanation. Avoid telling a child that a single event, relationship problem, argument, job loss, or other circumstance “caused” the death. It is safer and more accurate to explain that there were serious problems the person was not able to manage safely at that time.





ADDRESS SECRECY AND SHAME

Children may sense when adults are hiding something. Let them know the death is not their shame to carry. At the same time, teach appropriate privacy: they can choose whom they want to talk with, and they do not owe classmates or other people personal details.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION OPEN

A child's questions will change with development. Information appropriate for a young child may need to be expanded later. Tell the child they can return with questions, including difficult ones, and that adults will answer as honestly and safely as possible.

REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

Older children and teens may encounter information online or from peers. Ask what they have heard before assuming what they know. Correct misinformation without giving unnecessary detail, and talk openly about seeking help when emotional pain feels overwhelming.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

Honesty and protection can exist together. Tell the truth in words the child can understand, leave out unnecessary graphic detail, and keep the door open for future questions.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What does this child currently understand about how the person died? Is there a misunderstanding, secret, or self-blaming belief that needs a clear and compassionate response?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Children bereaved by suicide may benefit from qualified grief or mental-health support, particularly when there are traumatic reactions, persistent guilt, depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, or major changes in functioning. Any immediate concern that a child may harm themselves requires urgent emergency or crisis support.

A GENTLE CLOSING

A suicide death can be spoken about without giving a child frightening detail or placing adult burdens on them. Honest language, repeated reassurance, compassionate listening, and continued attention to safety can help a child live with a very difficult truth.

What does this child currently understand about how the person died? Is there a misunderstanding, secret, or self-blaming belief that needs a clear and compassionate response?

