

Talking With Children About Suicide Death

By Susan Coale, LCSW-C and Sarah Montgomery, LCSW-C

Talking with children about a death is never easy, but a suicide death poses even more of a challenge. Our impulse to shield children from painful events is natural; however, when a close friend or family member dies, it is important to discuss the loss openly and directly. Only by addressing such a painful topic with our children can we foster love, reassurance and security. By talking about suicide together, we model that no topic is unspeakable; all topics close to the heart can be discussed.

When a child's routine is suddenly disrupted, as it is when there is an unexpected death, they perceive the upset and anxiety being felt by the adults around them. Even if we are not ready to speak of what has happened, it is important to both affirm that something very sad is taking place and to convey that they are safe. For example: "Something very sad has happened to your sister and the ambulance is going to take her to the hospital. I am going to the hospital with her, but your favorite neighbor is going to stay here with you and give you some dinner. I will call you before you go to bed." This confirms for them the validity of their own perceptions, as well as assuring them that they will be cared for.

Later, the conversation needs to address the "sad" thing that has happened. To avoid the topic of a loved one's suicide suggests to the child that the topic is taboo and may serve to increase his or her worry. In the face of the uncertainty created by mixed messages, children may worry that they have done something bad to cause the upset around them. They may also become concerned that they or someone else they love is going to die. They may worry about who is going to take care of them. Having an age-appropriate understanding of what has happened is important. Opening the door to conversation about suicide death lets children know that it is okay to talk about their concerns, and adults are able to support them. Parents are sometimes tempted to avoid the truth and make up another cause of death when telling the child. Children inevitably discover the truth, so although well-meaning, creating a non-true story is not helpful. It may cause children to feel lied to by adults, losing trust in those who desire to protect them.

If you have already told a child that their friend or relative died in another manner (accident, cancer, etc.), explain to the child that you thought that this was protecting them at first, but now you realize that you need to tell them what actually happened. For example, "I know I said before that Steve had a heart attack. That is not true. I thought I was protecting you by saying that, but now I know it is better to tell you what really happened. He died by suicide. This means that he did something on purpose to make his body stop working. His brain was not working properly, and he was not thinking clearly at the time of his death. He had a type of brain attack, and he ended his own life."

Telling the truth does not mean sharing all the details. Whatever information is shared should be factual, but does not need to be all of the information available. This foundation of truth can be added to or expanded upon in future conversations. Sometimes the next conversation about how their loved one died will come soon. For others, it may be months or years, perhaps when they move into a new developmental stage and their ability to understand the nuances of the death deepens. If you are unsure about how to answer a particular question, it is often wise to say, "Good question. I don't know how to answer that right now, but I will get back to you soon with my thoughts." It is good modeling to take breaks to gather your thoughts.

Young children generally do not understand what dead means or that it is permanent. So it is helpful to begin by explaining death, then introducing the topic of suicide. For example, "when someone dies, their body stops working. This means that they no longer eat, sleep, or go to the bathroom. There are different things that make a person's body stop working. Mommy's brain had an illness and that caused her to make her own body stop working. That's how mommy died. The word for that is suicide. You did not do anything wrong or bad to make mommy die. And there's nothing you can do to make mommy come back because when a person dies their body stops working forever, so mommy cannot come back alive." It can be helpful to ask your child to repeat back to you what they understood you to say, giving you the opportunity to correct misunderstandings or to clarify.

An older child, perhaps late elementary or middle-school aged, will likely seek more understanding of what has happened. Here is a possible example of what to say: "Most folks, even in tough situations, can see many choices in front of them. For example, if someone fails math, they could take another math class or get a tutor. When a girlfriend and boyfriend break up, it will hurt the heart, but with time and friends, they will feel better and find someone else to love in the future. However, sometimes people with depression are not thinking right, and cannot see these options. All they can think about is ending their suffering. So they may take their own life and die by suicide. It has nothing to do with their love for you; they were just trapped in their own pain."

If you are talking with a group of children who vary in age, begin with language appropriate to the youngest in the group. Answers need to be shaped by the particular circumstances of death (for instance, if the deceased struggled for a long time with depression), the relationship with the loved one (was it someone closely involved with the child on a daily basis or someone they saw only periodically), and the particular emotional makeup of the youngster. Children need to know that nothing that they did, said, or thought caused the suicide. Most importantly, children need to understand that their feelings are acceptable, that they are normal, and they are safe and will be well-cared for.

A child dealing with suicide death is truly tragic, and most certainly the experience will impact her life. How and what we communicate can go a long way towards shaping that impact. As parents and caregivers of children who are struggling in the aftermath of a

suicide death, helping children understand and make meaning of their loss is tremendously important.

You might also find these books helpful:

Supporting Children After a Suicide Loss: A guide for parents and caregivers (2015) by Sarah S. Montgomery and Susan M. Coale. Pasadena, MD: Chesapeake Life Center.

Great Answers to Difficult Questions About Death: What Children Need to Know (2009) by Linda Goldman.
London England and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bart Speaks Out: Breaking the Silence on Suicide (1998) by Linda Goldman: Western Psychological Services.

My Uncle Keith Died (2006) by C. Loehr. Canada, USA, Ireland: Trafford Publishing

Red Chocolate Elephants For Children Bereaved by Suicide (2012) by Diana Sands.
Sydney, Australia: Karridale Pty Ltd.

Or visit these websites:

www.afsp.org

www.suicidology.org

www.dougy.org

www.myhealingplace.org

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