



Conversations matter:

A guide for talking with a child about suicide

Why this conversation matters

Talking with a child about suicide can feel overwhelming. You may worry about saying the wrong thing or causing distress. These feelings are completely normal.

This guide is to help trusted adults when they need to talk to a child about a suicide death. The resource is designed to be most useful for children under 12 years old.

You might be thinking

"I can't possibly find the right words to explain this"

"Maybe it would be better not to say anything."

"I don't want them to think it's their fault."

They might be thinking

"Something bad has happened, but no one is talking to me."

"I am worried. Maybe I've done something wrong."

Things to remember:

1. Prepare

2. Understand

3. Explain suicide

4. Support

5. Self-care



1. Prepare

Children will notice when something significant has happened, even when adults try to protect them from the details.

When adults don't talk with children directly, they may try to make sense of what happened on their own. This can include making up reasons for why the people around them are sad, or explanations for why someone has died.

They may learn about suicide by overhearing adult conversations or hearing the word used in the media or at school. When explaining suicide to a child, you don't need to have all the answers. What matters most is being calm, honest, and caring.

Tell the child as soon as possible if someone in their life has died by suicide. Take a moment to prepare before you speak with the child, as talking about suicide can be tough for adults too.

You do not need to know all the details to start this conversation. It is okay to say you don't know yet and to come back to the child when you know more.

It's ok to show your emotions, but it's important to remember that your role is to support the child during this conversation.

You may worry that talking about suicide, especially with children, can lead to them having suicidal thoughts. Research shows that talking about suicide in a safe, clear and non-judgmental way does not increase the risk of having suicidal thoughts. Instead, it is more likely that they will reach out for support when needed.

Think about:

- **When** you'll have this conversation. Make sure you have enough time to talk properly, have given the child time to process what they have heard and don't have to rush off anywhere.
- **Where** you'll be. Plan to talk somewhere quiet, private and where you'll both feel comfortable.
- **What** you'll say. Page 5 has some examples of what you could say. It can help to you prepare if you're feeling nervous or concerned.
- **Who** else will be there. If there will be more than one person talking to the child, make sure you agree in advance on the words you will use.



If you are not a child's parent, primary caregiver or close kin, it's best to leave this conversation to them. Instead, contact the family to discuss how they would like to let the child know about the death by suicide.

2. Understand

Ask a child what they know about death, and what 'being dead' means. This will make sure you talk about death, including death by suicide, in ways they understand.

Many children, even young ones, have been exposed to the concept of death through their experiences with pets, through stories, television and a variety of other ways. However, misinformation and misunderstandings are common, so it is always good to check what they know.

This is a guide for how children generally understand death according to their developmental stage. Children's development will vary, so use what you know about the child or ask them more questions to understand what they know.

Age	Understanding of death
3-5 years	• See death as reversible (for example sleeping). • May think their thoughts or actions contributed to a death. • Have a limited ability to understand concepts like suicide.
6-8 years	• Begin to understand death as permanent. • Are often curious about details including how and why someone died. • May fear others could die too and may blame themselves.
9-12 years	• Understand death is permanent and happens to everyone. • Will be able to understand suicide as a concept if explained and may have heard of it before. • Can understand the opinions or judgements of others. • Are more capable of hiding their feelings.

What to ask

- ✓ "Do you know what being dead means?"

What to avoid

Euphemisms like:

- × "He's gone to sleep."
- × "She's gone away."

This can unintentionally cause confusion.

It is important for younger children to understand that death:

- Is permanent and can't be changed
- Means the body stops working
- Happens to everyone eventually.



3. Explain

Use words children understand to explain suicide. While it is hard to tell a child about suicide, it's best for them to learn about it from someone they trust.

This way they can explore their feelings, while being supported by someone who cares about them.

It's important to be honest with children about the death, using explanations that are age and developmentally appropriate. Parents and caregivers will know their children best. Don't share details about the method used in the suicide or any other methods of suicide.

Find out whether they know anything about suicide

Children are not always aware of the word 'suicide' or they may have picked up misunderstandings about it from conversations and media.

You can ask

"Have you heard anything about suicide? What do you think it is?"

Explain suicide in plain language without any extra details

"Suicide is when someone makes their body stop working." (For children 6-8 years or younger if they ask about it)

"Suicide is the word we use when a person is so sad they do something to make themselves die."
(For children 9-12 years)

Answering tricky questions

Children are naturally curious and might ask some difficult questions that you don't know how to answer or find hard to talk about. Keep your answers simple, and don't share any extra details. Some children might ask a lot of questions and ask the same questions over and over again. Stay calm and answer in a consistent way. It's helpful for any other trusted adults who will talk to a child to agree on how they will talk about it, including answering questions.

You don't need to have all the answers. What matters most is being present, listening and letting them know they are not alone.

It is okay to say 'I don't know' and to let the child know you'll come back to them when you've had time to think or when you know more.

Here are some suggestions to help you talk about suicide.

What to say

They might ask: "Why did this happen?"

"People who die by suicide are often very sad and upset. They might feel like there isn't a way to feel better."

"It's important to know that there is always help to make people feel better if you are ever feeling this way."



What to avoid

Judgemental language, for example:
"She took the easy way out."

Any language that criticises the person who died, for example:
"They were a coward/ selfish."

They might ask: "How did they die?"

"They made their body stop working."

If they ask for more details:
"the details can be upsetting so we are not going to talk about that."



Talking about exactly how the person died. This should be avoided when talking to anyone, but especially children. It can be distressing and contribute to the child visualising the death.

They might ask: "Will this happen to other people I know, or to me?"

"Most people who feel really sad or upset don't die. It's important to tell other people if you feel this way because there are lots of ways to get support."

"If you are feeling sad you can talk to me again, and there are other helpers too like a teacher or Kids Helpline."



Making children fearful that everyone who experiences sadness will want to take their life.

They might ask: "Is this my fault?"

"No. What happened isn't your fault. You didn't cause this".



Providing a reason that blames someone's actions for the death of another person.

They might ask: "Where are they now?"

"Different families/people believe different things about what happens after someone dies. Where do you think they are?"



You might feel like it's easier to say:
"They're in a better place."
This can imply that death by suicide is a good thing. It's important that people know that they can get help and they won't always feel this way.

Telling a child about suicide later on

If you initially told a child a different story about how someone died, and didn't talk about suicide, it's not too late to explain that someone died by suicide later on.

Explain that sometimes when adults are upset, they can have difficulty talking and you could not find the right words at the time. You might also explain that what you told them at the time was right for their age.

Explain to them what happened simply, using some examples in this guide and correct any misinformation you shared.

I wish when I was younger someone had told me it wasn't my fault. I didn't hear this until much later and it would have changed my life.

Jon, Lived Experience Advisor

4. Support

Children should know it is okay to express emotions, but it is not their job to make things better for other people.

It's normal for any person bereaved by suicide to explore feelings of confusion or guilt. Children might feel this way too.

Keep answering any questions they have, and make sure they know no one is to blame when someone dies by suicide.

You'll most likely also be grieving the loss of the person, so it's okay for children to see you show emotions too.



Understanding grief

- Children show their grief differently to adults. They might respond in ways that you don't expect or initially understand.
- No two children will grieve in the same way.
- Younger children might show grief through changes in sleep, temper tantrums, worries about being separated from family members, refusing to go to school or through repetitive play.
- Older children might isolate themselves, have trouble sleeping or fear rejection from friends and family.
- You might also notice that children of any age may revert to behaviour more typical of a younger child for a period of time or experience unexplained physical symptoms.

Children may experience many emotions after a suicide death. As well as sadness or confusion, they may feel anger at the person who died.

Children's responses to grief and loss can also be shaped by those who care for them. It can be helpful to maintain routines and consistent people around them to provide support.

Ask the child questions to help you understand how they are feeling.

You can ask

"Is there anything you want to tell me about how you are thinking or feeling?"

As children grow, their understanding of what has happened may change. Adults should revisit conversations over time, using age-appropriate language to talk about what children are thinking and feeling.

Help the child talk to others

Encourage the child to talk about their feelings and worries, either with you or another trusted adult. This might be a grandparent, uncle or aunt, family friend or favourite teacher.

You can say

"You can talk to me about this again any time."

"There are other people who can help too like [grandparents/teacher/aunt or uncle]"

"We can call Kids Helpline together if you want to talk to someone about how you're feeling."



There might be a time when it would be helpful for a child to get some extra support, this might be by calling **Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800**, from a school counsellor or health professional.

Parents and caregivers can also call Kids Helpline and Lifeline for support around how to navigate these conversations and support children during difficult times.

Children might also expose other children to the concept of death and suicide by talking about this at school or at other activities. Practice some simple words they can use so that your child can explain what happened to other children. It might also be helpful to talk to other parents, carers and family members to explain that someone you know has died by suicide.

Talk about how you have explained this to the child so they are prepared if your child raises it. It's also a good idea to let your child's school know what has happened, so they can support your child and respond appropriately if other children have questions..

You can also share this resource to help them answer any questions.



5. Self-care

Be kind to yourself. It can be draining to try and manage a child's grief as well as your own. You'll also be affected by the suicide and need support from friends, family or others you can talk to. Specialist suicide bereavement services (what professionals call 'postvention' services) are available to family and friends affected by suicide. They can provide immediate and ongoing support.

It's important to:

- Talk to someone you trust
- Connect with supports
- Increase your self-care strategies.



Support services

24/7 Crisis support

- **Lifeline:** Call 13 11 14 | Text 0477 13 11 14 | lifeline.org.au
- **Suicide Callback Service:** 1300 659 467 | suicidecallbackservice.org.au
- **beyondblue:** 1300 22 4636 | beyondblue.org.au
- **MensLine Australia:** 1300 78 99 78 | mensline.org.au

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

- **13 Yarn:** 13 92 76 | 13yarn.org.au
- **Thirrili:** 1800 805 801 | thirrili.com.au



Supports for children

- **Kids Helpline (5-25 years):** 1800 55 1800 | kidshelpline.com.au
- **Feel the Magic:** 1300 602 465 | feelthemagic.org.au
- **headspace (12-25 years):** headspace.org.au
- **Medicare Mental Health - Kids Hubs:** 1800 595 212 | medicarementalhealth.gov.au/finding-help/kids-hubs

Other supports

- **GriefLine:** 1300 845 745 | griefline.org.au
- **StandBy - Support After Suicide:** 1300 727 247 | standbysupport.com.au
- **Open Arms Veterans & Families counselling:** 1800 011 046 | openarms.gov.au/get-support/counselling

Useful resources

- **Emerging Minds:** emergingminds.com.au
- **#chatsafe:** orygen.org.au/chatsafe

If you speak a language other than English, use Translating and Interpreting Service to access any of these supports 131 450.

This is a free service.

If you are worried about someone's immediate safety, **call 000**.

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