



# HOW TO DISCUSS LOSS BY SUICIDE

CHILDREN AGED 7-13



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## DISCUSSING LOSS BY SUICIDE WITH YOUR CHILDREN

### 1. CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Find a quiet place where you can talk without distractions or interruptions. Include another adult if your child(ren) (or you) may be comforted by their presence.

### 2. BE HONEST AND SPECIFIC

Be direct as you prepare your child for the news: "I need to tell you something important that's going to be hard to talk about. Daddy has died." Provide accurate, age-appropriate information. If you have several children of different ages, start with the language appropriate to the youngest. It is important to use the right words: "Daddy died by suicide, which means he killed himself." Explain the death as the tragic outcome of a serious mental illness (ie, depression, anxiety, trauma, etc.), rather than using terms that imply daddy didn't want to be in the world anymore. Talking about suicide WILL NOT increase the risk of suicide that others will go on to take their own lives, especially if it is framed appropriately. Highlight that these illnesses can be treated and managed, but for some seriously struggling and not getting help, they can be fatal. Encourage all questions and any feelings that will arise with this disturbing news. Knowing the truth about mental illness and suicide whilst highlighting the importance of addressing and treating such concerns when they come up will teach a valuable lesson about self-care.

Although you may want to be vague or avoid the topic thinking it will protect your child, vague messages easily confuse kids and they may fill the gaps in their understanding with their imagination or things others say. Avoiding or downplaying the true circumstances can undermine trust and create a legacy of secrecy and shame in your relationship with your child(ren). You can protect your child(ren) best by offering accurate information, a space to express feelings and ask questions, honest answers, as well as comfort and reassurance.

### 3. WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

You may not have all the answers and that's alright. The important thing is to establish and open the lines of communication. If you do have to explain death, talk in terms of the body not working anymore. You might say, "Dead means the person's body stops working and they can't do things like walk or talk anymore. When someone is dead, it can't be fixed, and they can't come back." Show that you are available to answer questions along the way and be upfront about what you are still unsure of at this stage. By including your child in these conversations, you are showing him or her that your family will go through this together.



### 4. COMFORT AND KEEP YOUR CHILD CLOSE

Throughout the conversation, reinforce that they are safe, and you are safe. Stay close to your child and offer hugs or cuddles while you speak with them about this difficult topic. Comfort them by highlighting that they will continue to be cared for and loved no matter what.

### 5. THEY ARE NOT TO BLAME

While this may be obvious to you, kids tend to believe they cause things to happen by what they do or say. They often think back on things they did or could have done differently, or things they should and shouldn't have done, as if their actions could have influenced or prevented what happened. Reassure them by addressing their concerns that they will continue to be loved and cared for, and what's happening to their loved one isn't happening because of anything they did or said. Regrets are a common aspect of grief; however, it should be emphasized that many factors play into why someone dies by suicide, many of which are outside of your child's control and influence.

### 6. WHAT'S NEXT?

Let your child know what will happen next. The death of their loved one will likely mean your child must cope with changes in their routine. Be clear about any new arrangements that have been made so they can adjust in anticipation of those changes. For example, "Aunt Beth will pick you up from school like Mum used to." Explain that grief may bring a range of feelings up and this is normal. Emphasise the importance of openly communicating with trusted loved ones about these emotions and finding ways to cope in the moments they do come up. Help them find appropriate ways to express and release these emotions through things like music, art, activity, and play.

It's important to include your child in mourning rituals such as viewings, funerals, or memorial services. Explain ahead of time what will happen at these ceremonies. For example, "Lots of people who loved Daddy will be there. We will sing, pray, and talk about Daddy's life. People will cry and hug each other. Some people will come up to us and say things like, 'I'm sorry for your loss.' We can say, 'Thank you' back to be polite. You can stay next to me and hold my hand if you want." You can highlight that people will be sharing memories of Daddy to celebrate his life, which helps people feel better.

Ask your child if they would like to play a role in the ceremony. Even a small role can help kids master the emotional situation and instil a memory of being a part of the collective grieving experience. Of course, allow your child to decide whether or not they would like to take part.



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