



How to Talk with Children about Suicide

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“Suicide is not chosen; it happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with pain.”

—Martha Ainsworth

Give age-appropriate and truthful facts and explanations

By dealing with the facts of the death, we help to stop rumors which only confuse and distort reality. Children deserve to have the grown-ups in their lives be honest with them rather than confuse them with half-truths or lies.

Understandably, adults are sometimes negatively influenced and overwhelmed by the cause of death. The fears that stop adults from speaking the truth may seem protective, but actually inhibit the freedom for children to grieve. Kids need to know the truth about the death of someone they love before they can begin the grieving process themselves. Eventually the truth will be discovered – from the media, a neighbor, a classmate... better it first come from a caring adult in that child's life.

When we choose to not talk about suicide with children, we perpetuate the stigma and shame associated with death by suicide. By talking openly with children and allowing them to ask questions, we help to break down the stigma and the walls of shame which have unfortunately been built high by our society.

How do you explain that someone died from suicide to a child?

“I have something really sad I have to tell you. (Name of person) died from suicide.

*When we say that someone dies that means their body stops working
and the word suicide means they made their own body stop working. Does that make sense?”*

The last sentence gives the child a chance to ask further questions to get the information they need to process the news you are telling them. Some of the questions may be hard but know that if a child is old enough to ask the question they are old enough to hear the answer.

Be open about mental illness

Unfortunately there is also considerable stigma and shame surrounding mental illness. Our brain is an organ, and just like other organs in our body, our brains can also be “sick”. This is not a sign of weakness, it is a very real struggle for many people of all ages. If the person suffered from such things as depression, anxiety, or personality disorders, we need to openly talk about that with our children. Often, suicide and suicide attempts are related to these types of mental illnesses. Knowing these facts can facilitate talking openly about a suicide. We can explain to a child that their loved one's brain was “sick” and “not able to think clearly” when this tragedy happened.

Dispel MYTHS of suicide

Avoid saying things that suggest the person “made a bad choice.”

We cannot know what was going on in the mind of the person who has died. Perhaps they were incapable of concrete, rational thinking, which is necessary in order to make an informed choice:

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We need to be mindful about how a child might translate that their loved one “made a choice”:

“So - my mommy or daddy ‘chose’ not to be with me anymore? OR Why? Was I bad? Didn’t they love me?”

In the shadow of suicide, we are left with so many “Why?” questions. We need not create more.

Avoid proliferating the myth that this was a “selfish” act. Again, we cannot know the thought process of the person who has died. Perhaps in their mind (likely absent of rational thought at the time) this was *selfless*; that those they love most would be *better off* without them....

Avoid the phrase: “Suicide is always preventable.” This places blame and makes a very loud and negative statement to the surviving family and friends that they *should have* or *could have done more to help*.

The “Glorifying” MYTH

To suggest that we are “glorifying” suicide by acknowledging and talking about someone who has died by suicide is an unreasonable assertion at best. The assumption is that drawing attention to the person who died and talking about how they died will somehow cause the surviving children to want to go die as well.

While “copy-cat” suicides are real, in those cases we typically can trace *preexisting mental health issues* with the person who has copied. *The copying does not occur because we have been open and honest about someone who has died.*

Question: Will telling a child the truth about a loved one’s suicide diminish the love the child felt toward that person?

This is a very legitimate and real concern many parents share especially when a child’s other parent or sibling has died by suicide. In a word, no. If we have honestly explained the facts of the cause of death to the child, we can easily move forward from there to the important task of honoring that person’s life. The meaning of one’s life is never solely defined by the moment of his or her death.

Share good memories and talk about ways to honor the person’s life

I believe that one of the most important things we teach our children is how to honor life during life and also how to honor life when someone has died. Acknowledging someone has died is the first step in honoring the life that was lived. Children have wonderful ideas for how to honor life – explore them together.

When we are honest with our children from the beginning, we can then *together* experience the tumultuous journey of grief from its beginning, and move forward *together*.