



Parental Guidance - When Your Child Knows Someone Who Died By Suicide

If a family member, friend, classmate, or someone else in your child's life takes their own life, having open conversations with children about what happened and how to cope represents critical but sensitive terrain to navigate. While tragic, approaching these dialogues with compassion, honesty, and care can help children grieve, find closure, and protect their own mental well-being.

When a suicide personally impacts young people, avoiding the topic out of grief or uncertainty actually risks causing more harm by leaving them confused, distressed, and alone in making sense of the tragic loss. Our child's ability to integrate experiences into their understanding of themselves, relationships, and the world depends on our willingness to bravely discuss even life's hardest realities.

Read on for guidance on why children need facts, how to sensitively share information on suicide loss, common grief reactions, overcoming stigma, accessing support, and protecting their emotional well-being throughout the traumatic time. With unconditional love and openness, we can guide kids through darkness back into light.

Why Youth Need Facts Around Suicide Loss

Human instinct urges shielding kids from harsh realities like suicide to preserve innocence and avoid burden. But in absence of truthful information from trusted adults, children imagine explanations potentially more disturbing than the reality. Allowing distorted assumptions often does more harm than truth itself.

Some key reasons full, age-appropriate facts help children cope:

- Factual knowledge corrects frightening myths or self-blame if they know real causes. Kids tend to assume responsibility without context.
- Accurate details help them process motivations behind the tragic act versus envisioning scenarios based on limited understanding.
- Open conversation builds trust, allowing them to confide feelings stirred up rather than worrying alone.
- Honesty combats stigma or notions that suicide should stay secret. This encourages help-seeking if they ever battle self-harm urges.

With compassion and care, we can share enough to bring comfort through clarity without overwhelming sensitive young hearts.

Sensitively Sharing Information on Suicide Loss

When discussing suicide loss with children, consider these guidelines, adapting details to their developmental age and closeness to the deceased:

- If age 12+, give simple, direct explanations about how the person died, using words like “suicide” and “killed themselves” rather than euphemisms, but avoid graphic details.
- Counter potential self-blame by emphasizing nothing they did or didn’t do caused the suicide. Mental health disorders or distress prompted the tragic act.
- Allow chances to ask questions and don’t shy from truthful, age-appropriate answers. It’s better for kids to get facts from you versus their own assumptions.

- Explain that suicide does not mean the person did not love them or will stop loving them. Reassure that connection endures.
- Note that suicidal thinking stems from mental illness, distress, or mistaken beliefs that problems cannot improve, but underscore that help is always available—suicide is not the only choice.
- Share that people who die by suicide usually desire to end severe emotional or physical pain rather than their actual lives. Stress that problems leading to suicide can be treated.
- Highlight the importance of them confiding in you or other trusted adults if they ever experience severe emotional distress or self-harm thoughts. Get professional help immediately.

You know your adolescent best, so gauge how much they can handle digesting at once while letting questions guide how extensive to make initial discussions, adding more details over time as needed.

Expect a Range of Grief Reactions

Whether the deceased was a peer or older person in their world, witnessing suicide's devastation ignites complex emotions like:

- Deep sadness and tearfulness over the permanent loss of someone they care for
- Anxiety about other loved ones dying or abandoned relationships
- Anger at the person who died or for causing such pain to loved ones left behind
- Guilt over not recognizing their emotional struggles while living
- Fear that they or someone else they know may become suicidal
- Difficulty concentrating on school/activities due to constant processing
- Physical complaints like headaches, stomach pain, or insomnia from grief-based distress
- Regressive behaviors in young kids like thumb-sucking or bedwetting

Allow youth space to openly discuss and express whatever reactions surface. There are no right or wrong emotions, just genuine ones needing empathetic outlets.

Combating Stigma with Compassion

Anyone losing a loved one or friend to suicide likely encounters unwarranted stigma rooted in outdated religious or moral misconceptions. But judgments further isolate kids already wrestling enormous hurt. Make sure they know:

- Nothing they or the deceased did was sinful or disgraceful. Mental illness/anguish explains the tragic choice.
- People who take their own lives often wrongly believe it will relieve unbearable pain or stop them being a burden on others. Suicide is not selfish but based on misconceptions.
- They should speak up if anyone shames them or the loved one due to the cause of death. Dispel hurtful misinformation.
- Suicide results from health conditions requiring compassionate treatment, not moral shortcomings.
- They can cherish happy memories and maintain a connection with the person's spirit.

Significant progress reducing prejudice around suicide has occurred in recent decades. But outdated stigmas still sometimes surface. Combat them by emphasizing suicide stems from illness, not character.

Securing Professional Support

In addition to surrounding kids with unconditional family support, securing counselors or therapists trained in childhood grief allows them to express volatile emotions in productive ways. Benefits include:

- Developing vocabulary and understanding around complex concepts like death, loss, pain, hopelessness
- Processing feelings of anger, guilt, and betrayal with a neutral professional rather than taking it out on family
- Learning healthy coping mechanisms to manage trauma-related stress like anxiety, depression, or outbursts
- Joining peer groups to share experiences and realize they aren't alone or abnormal for intense reactions
- Parents also learning tools to nurture children through the rocky grieving period

Make sure any providers have expertise in suicide bereavement specifically. Local suicide prevention advocates can refer options.



If kids refuse formal counseling, keep lines open for if they change their mind.

Protecting Their Fragile Hearts

In the traumatic aftermath of suicide loss, extra vigilance to safeguard children's well-being helps prevent long-term emotional damage:

- Monitor for changes indicating their own depression or suicidal thinking to get immediate treatment. Grief can unearth buried issues.
- Limit exposure to grieving adults' intense distress. Have backup childcare plans for your own low moments.
- Maintain soothing routines and family time. Allow any comfort objects. Keep their world stable and secure.
- Encourage reminiscing about positive memories of the person, but don't let their death define all conversations.
- Treat any destructive behaviors as manifestations of inner hurt without shaming. Provide healthy outlets.
- Let teachers know of the loss for additional monitoring and support at school.

No one should have to bear suicide's profound aftershocks alone. Your listening presence, empathy, and constant assurance that their feelings are normal but their future remains brightly filled with love matters more than any perfect words in the shattering moments suicide delivers.

Some of life's deepest pain and purpose emerges from these difficult crossroads if we walk them together. While long and winding, the road stretching ahead holds light again. They just need your hand leading the way