

# Child & Teen Grief after a Suicide

## How You Can Help and Factors to Consider

A child or teen's grief is impacted by many factors, including the circumstances of the death. A death by suicide can merit special considerations for the bereaved due to its associated stigma, sudden nature, and the confusion that often follows. Unfortunately, because of people's discomfort with the subject of suicide, young people can be left unsupported and isolated.

While there may be a higher likelihood of trauma for those left behind after someone takes their own life, this is not always the case. Each person's experience is unique.

### How You Can Help

#### Share information in a timely manner

Young people will know something terrible has happened. The longer it takes you to share the information, the more likely they will hear about the death and circumstances from someone else.

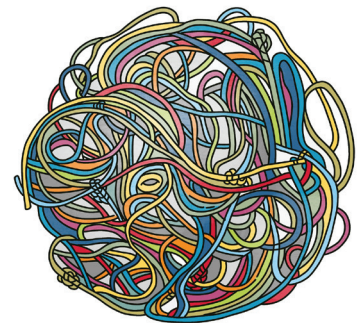
#### Tell the truth

It is natural to want to protect children from pain and distress. However, untruths can lead to confusion and broken trust when they hear the truth from friends, family members, or social media.

#### Limit the information

Telling the truth doesn't mean telling the whole truth. Be careful with how much information you share. You want to start with limited information: "I have something sad to share with you: \_\_\_\_\_ died."

You may also choose to share information about the death in stages. You can begin by indicating that something physically happened to cause the death: "he died because his heart stopped." Later you can add, "his heart stopped because \_\_\_\_\_." Even when sharing data in stages, limit details about the mode of death.



### **Remember the person**

After a suicide, it is essential to provide opportunities to remember the deceased and share memories and both positive and challenging experiences. People often limit conversations to the mode of death and their personal beliefs about suicide. This can be difficult for survivors because the person's life can become overshadowed by the circumstances of their death.

### **Be guided by their questions**

The best way to know what and how much children/teens need to know is by paying attention to their questions. Acknowledge their questions (don't brush them aside) and respond. Your response doesn't need to answer their question fully, but make sure they know you've heard them. You might say, "I understand that you have questions about all of this," and "I'm not sure we will get answers to all our questions today, but we will try to get some answers." It's also okay and valuable to say, "I don't know." This is true when considering the specific means by which the person died (e.g. hanging, overdose).

### **Focus on feelings**

Open the dialogue and focus on feelings and grief experiences. One way to start a conversation and keep it going is to share how you feel: "I'm feeling confused" or "I'm having a hard time concentrating at work. Is it hard for you to focus at school, or is it just me?" Share about your feelings and grief experience in small doses as a conversation opener or response to their questions or their sharing.

You can also use the reassuring "we." A death in a child or teen's life can shake their world and sense of safety (see Child Grief & Teen Grief handouts). Our primary role is to help them feel safe physically and emotionally. Such statements as "We're going to be okay" or "We'll figure this out together," even said through tears, feel reassuring.

### **Be mindful of your language**

The ways that people talk about suicide can have a significant impact on the bereaved. Consider your own beliefs about suicide and choose words that will allow for conversations rather than stigmatize the death further. For example, commit suicide implies that the person who died broke the law and committed a crime. We prefer the terms "died by suicide" and "took their own life." While there is no right way, try to follow the family's lead and use non-judgmental language.

## Reach out for support

There are times when someone outside the family can help offer support. Counsellors at the Children's Grief Centre can support young people by creating a safe space to explore some of the complex emotions, questions, and experiences following a death by suicide. Children and teens may find it difficult to say what they need. Try offering specific things like watching a movie, share memories, or engage in an activity together.

## Share information with others

While a death in our family or close friend circle feels very personal and private, it is helpful for your child or teen's school to be aware. They might notice your child is struggling with attention to schoolwork, relationships, or separation anxiety. In that case, they can consider the behaviour in the context of what is going on and respond with compassion and support.

## Factors to Consider

### Changes

Consider changes in your child or teen's behaviours, friends, tastes, and moods. The changes will provide a window to their inner world and give you a sense of how the death is impacting them. This is especially important with suicide deaths as children and teens may not feel they can talk openly about the death or their grief with others.



### Family Social support

What support is available to them? To whom do they feel they can go? Are their loss and grief acknowledged? Strong family support and communication will act as a buffer to the negative impact of the loss.

### Age

Children of different ages understand death differently (see Child Grief handout).

### Relationship with the deceased

What role did the deceased play in your child or teen's life? Their relationship and the nature of their attachment will colour their grief.

## Circumstances of the death

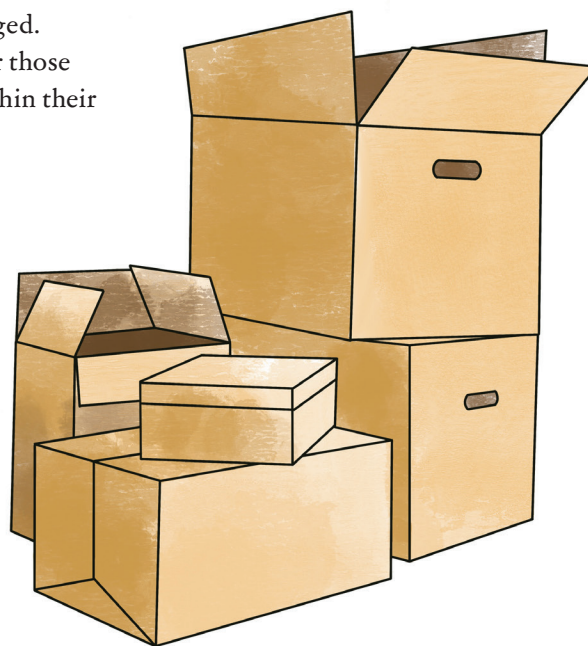
Factors associated with deaths by suicide such as finding the body, suicide notes, questions about why, and involvement of the first responders can lead to additional difficulties.

## Personality and coping styles

How has your child or teen handled difficult situations in the past? What coping mechanisms are they using now? Are they talking to someone, looking for comfort in you or other significant adults? Are they refusing to acknowledge what happened, drinking, fighting? Encouraging positive and effective coping strategies will enable your child and teen to feel some control and relief in these difficult times.

## Culture and religion

Unlike many other deaths, suicide is not always openly acknowledged in some cultures and religions. This may result in children, teens, and families feeling isolated and judged. Positive outcomes are more likely for those who find acceptance and support within their cultural group.



*Please refer to the Child Grief and Teen Grief handouts for information on age-related understanding of death, typical responses to grief, and ways you can help. These resources provide helpful guidance but remember that grief responses are individual, and each child and teen's grief experience will be unique.*

*For more information, a consultation, or to seek support for your child, teen, and family, contact us at 403-263-4525 or [info@childrengriefcentre.ca](mailto:info@childrengriefcentre.ca).*