

HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT SUICIDE

by TAPS Suicide Postvention Team



Telling a child about suicide can feel daunting. We fear we won't have the right words. We worry that children may feel that the death was their fault or that they could have done something to prevent it. However difficult it may seem, the truth in most cases is a good approach. Here are a few suggestions on how to talk to children about suicide:

Talk to your children openly.

The first step is to get support. You want to understand how to best talk to children about suicide so you feel more confident in having the discussion. Children have a good sense when things are “off.” They may overhear adult conversations, begin to construct their own ideas on what happened or create their own images in their minds. Without accurate information, they may create their own stories which could be incorrect or worse than what actually happened. In most cases, it is recommended to be honest and upfront from the beginning. Tell the truth using age appropriate language in alignment with the child's developmental ability to understand. Still, there can be challenging circumstances where discretion would be advised; TAPS can help you decide what and when to share with your children based on your family's specific circumstances.

Keep it simple and use words that a child will understand.

Depending on your child's age, you might need to begin with a simple explanation of what it means to die, gently emphasizing the permanence of death. It is best to be concise but avoid details on specifics of the scene or any “method” that was used. Be prepared to answer any questions they may ask, or to expect no questions at all or not just yet. Let them know that when they do have questions, you will be open and available, and that you will do your best to talk it through with them. Explain that you may not have all of the answers because you may be unsure yourself. Some helpful phrases to explain what happened could include:

- ***He made his body stop working.***
- ***She died by suicide.***
- ***He ended his life.***

It is okay to express your emotions.

When you express your own emotions around your grief, it gives your children permission to show their emotions, too. This is a very difficult loss and can bring with it some hard, foreign emotions: guilt, confusion, shame, anger and sadness are all normal reactions. You can let them know that it's ok to feel whatever they are feeling while you model healthy ways to express those feelings: talk about them, cry if you need to, exercise, go for a walk, do an activity like art or listen to music, and rest. You can learn to grieve as a family and create healthy ways to cope with this loss together.

Prepare children to talk with others.

Let them know that you will always be available to talk with them about their feelings and emotions. Still, it is helpful to identify other people who will be good supporters to them as well, such as grandparents, teachers, mentors, or counselors. You can also explain there are special “doctors” that your family can talk to help understand these difficult feelings. It may be helpful to come up with a prepared statement that your child can use to tell people what has happened, and you can work with your child to create different responses depending upon who they are talking to.

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For example, your child may want to plan a response when a classmate asks what happened or why they were out of school. That answer may be very different from one they use when adults inquire. Planned, simple responses can make them feel more secure and prepared if they get asked tough questions:

- ***My dad died from wounds he got from fighting in a war.***
- ***My mom died by suicide and we're still working on understanding it.***
- ***I'm not ready to talk about it yet, but I am very sad that my brother died.***
- ***I'm really not comfortable talking about it right now.***

Let them help you craft what they feel comfortable with. Keep in mind that each of your children may approach the death differently, and may want to share more or less than their siblings. It is important to give each child permission to talk about the loss and their grief—or not—in a way that makes them most comfortable, especially when talking with people outside the family. As they get older, their comfort levels around what they want to share may change, too.

Everyone grieves differently, and this includes children.

Depending on their developmental age and their personalities, children's reactions will vary. Remind your children that you are all in this together and to be patient and kind to not just yourselves, but to each other. Talk about the ways that you can help each other. Come up with ideas on things that may or may not help each person individually, as grief may look and feel different to each of you.

About the Team

The TAPS Suicide Prevention & Postvention Team is a division of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) that addresses the challenge of suicide in the military, the veteran community, and across the nation. This team of dedicated professionals draws from a powerful combination of clinical expertise, survivor "lived experience," and TAPS own best practices in peer-to-peer grief support to care for those who have lost loved ones to suicide and help others prevent more loss.

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