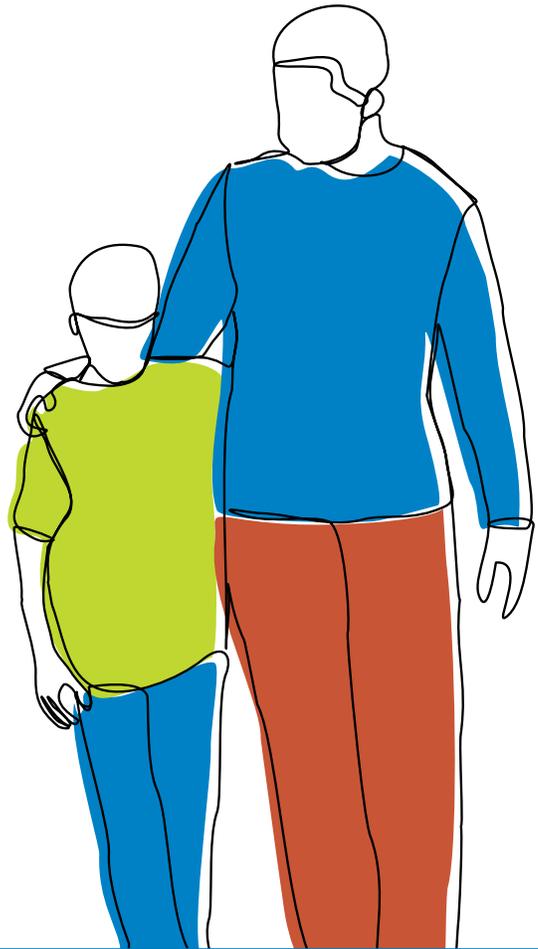


TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT A SUICIDE



Talking to children about a suicide can be difficult. But doing so can greatly benefit those who are facing this type of death. Research has shown that talking about suicide does not increase a child's risk of suicide.¹ In fact, this discussion can lead to a rewarding learning experience.

This guide is designed to help parents, guardians, and caregivers of children under 12 know how to speak with them when a suicide occurs in their family or community. It was developed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, in consultation with experts and other stakeholders.



Getting ready for your talk

A child in your care may become aware of the suicide of a friend, classmate, family member, or an associate through the media, social media, their friends, or by overhearing adult conversations. Such an event is a compelling reason to prepare yourself for a talk.



Start by taking time to reflect on your own feelings. Taking note of your own feelings after hearing about a suicide is important before you talk to the child. Adults often find it much more difficult to talk about death than children do.



You may not know where to begin or even think that it's easier to say nothing. But a child in your care may be worried that something bad has happened, and that no one is talking to them about it. Children generally know when a suicide occurs and often have questions and concerns. Yet they may avoid expressing them unless an adult gives them an opportunity to talk.



Consider having a “sideways conversation” with the child; that is, situating yourself “hip to hip” so you’re both facing forward. You might, for example, start the conversation while driving, walking, or cooking. Talking and listening without eye contact is a promising strategy for building trust and putting less pressure on caregivers and children, allowing both to speak more openly.² The more often you do it, the easier it becomes.



Be prepared to ask questions and listen carefully to what the child says. You could start by asking how the child is, and then follow up with questions on what they know about the death or if they had heard about the suicide. After that, you could ask the child what it means to them and how they may be feeling about it. Try to answer any questions directly and consistently.



Figuring out what to say

Research has shown that children who experience a loss from suicide cope better when they are given honest information.³ It's even better when it comes from a trusted adult, in language that they can understand and in an environment they're familiar with.



Children should also be given the opportunity to have their feelings acknowledged, even if it doesn't seem like grief or the grief seems short-lived. **Encourage the child to express their feelings.** Listen well and observe their actions. Children often show adults how they need to be supported.

Children must also be reassured that the suicide wasn't their fault and that they couldn't have done anything to prevent it. The child in your care could be thinking that their thoughts or behaviours may have contributed to the person's death. **Reassure them that they are not responsible in any way.**



Listen to and accept the feelings the child expresses. Besides feeling responsible, children may feel angry at the person for dying, or they may be disappointed or worried. They may also be curious about details related to the burial, cremation, or what happened. Be aware that children may not seem sad when you think they should be. Sometimes grief is avoided by distractions or acting out.

Encourage the child to express all their feelings.



Language matters

When talking with the child in your care, try to avoid negative, false, judgmental, or abstract statements; for instance, the person has gone “to sleep,” “away,” “to a better place,” or the person “is not hurting anymore,” “took an easy way out” or “was selfish.” While meant to help, such explanations may confuse a child who knows something awful has happened.

Instead, use facts and let your cultural beliefs guide you in your choice of words. When you’re ready to talk with the child, start with simple statements like “you may have heard that someone has died,” or “this might be very hard, and it’s okay if you cry.”

You could also ask the child in your care if they know what it means when someone dies. If the child is very young, you may find yourself having to explain what “died” means, using examples they can understand; for instance, “when a person dies, his or her body does not work anymore,” or “he or she is no longer alive.”

You may need to have these conversations more than once.



How much can children understand?

You may be tempted to protect the child from their feelings, but the support you provide will help them express and accept them. How they do so will depend on their age, personality, and connection to the person that died.

Research on child development tells us that children express grief differently than adults and that no two children express themselves in the same way.⁴ They may also express sadness through their actions; for example, in the way they interact with others:



IN YOUNG CHILDREN (two to five years), you may see disrupted sleep patterns, frustration with normal tasks, or concern when separated from the people in their lives. They might or might not ask questions. Young children don't understand that death is permanent, and they may worry about what it feels like being buried in a coffin or cremated. They may think they could still contact someone who has died or that a doctor could bring them back to life.



SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN (six to eight years) can understand that death is permanent and that a person who has died is not coming back. But they may continue to think or act as though the person is like someone still living who can hear or see them or feel things.



PRE-TEEN OR TWEEN-AGE CHILDREN (nine to 12 years) can also understand that death is permanent, and they may even have questions about what specifically caused the death. They generally know when adults are trying to protect them by not telling the truth, and they often learn of a suicide from other children or by overhearing conversations.



Things to remember

After time passes, children may come to understand and accept the death but may have more questions or experience grief differently as they grow older and confront new experiences.



Expect milestones like birthdays or holidays to surface difficult feelings. At these times, be prepared to talk about the suicide. Let the child know you care and follow their lead on what to talk about. You can also be supportive by maintaining routines.



The child may also talk with other children about the suicide, which is another reason to talk with them as simply and honestly as possible. **Avoid judgmental language, stick to facts (about the person and the suicide), and help them sort out their feelings.** That way, if they do speak with others, they too can find the right words.

Reminding the child that it's OK to respectfully tell their friends that they don't want to talk about the suicide is also important.

Avoid judgmental language, stick to facts (about the person and the suicide), and help them sort out their feelings.



SUPPORT TOOLS

Resources are available if you are seeking support. By asking for help yourself, you'll be better able to help the child in your care.

You can also reach out to a primary health-care provider such as a doctor or nurse. Others who may be able to offer support include Elders, community bereavement programs, counselling services, friends and family members, crisis lines, or faith leaders.

Resources for parents, guardians, and caregivers of children under 12

Helplines

The [Canada Suicide Prevention Service](#) is available 24-7 at 1-833-456-4566. This toll-free line provides access to crisis support from anywhere in Canada.

The [Crisis Text Line](#) (powered by Kids Help Phone) is available 24-7. This Canada-wide service can be accessed from any text-enabled cell phone. To reach a crisis responder, text: TALK to 686868.

[Kids Help Phone](#) is available 24-7 at 1-800-668-6868. This toll-free line provides counsellors who can speak with children, youth, and parents.

The [First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line](#) is available 24-7 at 1-855-242-3310 Canada-wide.

Additional resources

- From Suicide Prevention Ottawa, a toolkit for parents, caregivers, and educators to help them speak to children about suicide loss: [Postvention Toolkit: Phase 2](#)
- If you feel that the child you are supporting would benefit, the Alberta government offers [two graphic novels and videos](#) created by and for First Nations and Métis youth to support suicide prevention for Indigenous children, youth, and families.
- From the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, a list of common questions and answers to support parents and caregivers when preparing to speak with a child who's had a parent die by suicide: [When a Parent Dies by Suicide: What Kids Want to Know](#)

1. ["Talking to Your Kids About Depression and Suicide,"](#) an article from Nationwide Children in the U.S. that addresses the concern that talking about suicide increases the risk of suicidal ideation in children.
2. ["The Power of Talking Sideways to Children,"](#) an article from the Guardian in the U.K. that discusses how powerful this approach to conversations and listening can be for caregivers and children.
3. See the [resources list](#) from the Children and Youth Grief Network, which advocates for educational opportunities and support services to benefit children and youth grieving the death of someone they care about.
4. To learn more about supporting a child when someone in their life has died or understanding how to address a child's grief, visit [KidsGrief.ca](#).



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