

Supporting children and young people

When someone suicides it generally affects the whole family, people who are close to them, and sometimes the whole community. Often people think that children don't know what suicide means. However, most children do understand about killing yourself from as young as eight years old. And tragically they can be affected in different ways. Such as the suicide of their parent, sibling, girl or boyfriend, a mate or someone else they care about. Or they may have witnessed the death or discovered the person's body.

Even though you may think the children are not aware about what has happened, they are extremely sensitive and are likely to have picked up that something is wrong. Or they may have overheard you or others talking about it. How they demonstrate grief can be different to adults due to their age, stage of development and range of life experiences. From when we are born we can love, so from birth we can also grieve.

It may seem the children are coping well as they might not cry much or seem sad like adults do. But their grief comes in bursts, going from playing to being sad and back again quickly. Behaviours you might notice include:

Toddlers	Being clingy, easily upset, want to be helped more, not sleeping or feeding well.
Children	Acting out, fear you leaving too, start wetting the bed or sucking their thumb again.
Young people	Ask about the future, become angry or aggressive, start drinking or using drugs, spend a lot of time alone or not want to talk to anyone.

Tips to help children cope and understand death

Everyone is going to die sometime.

When someone dies, it is permanent. Nothing can bring them back, but we still remember them.

Sometimes death is unpredictable like a bad traffic accident, or heart attack or suicide.

Regardless of what was said or done, it is not their fault that the person died.

Though they are gone, there are other people who love them and will be there for them.

Some more helpful tips

Whether to say it's a suicide death or not	It's best to be honest, otherwise sooner or later they will find out. And that can cause them not to trust you. Tell them in a way they will understand. But don't go into graphic details.
Children take things literally so it's best not to say	They went to sleep. We lost them. They've left us. Instead you could say the person got sick and made their body stop working.
Don't hide your grief	It's important for children to see you are grieving and be involved in the funeral. This helps them learn how to mourn.
It's important to keep the usual routine	Provides predictability. Helps them feel safe/secure and cared for. Helps them see that things will continue.
Memories and staying connected	It's normal for children to worry about forgetting the person who died. But easy to help them stay connected by talking about special times, photo album, drawing, singing, having keepsakes.
Others who need to know	It helps the children have support and not have to keep it a secret if you tell their teacher, child care staff or others they spend a lot of time with.