

# When a Child's Friend Dies by Suicide

## **FIRST: DEAL WITH YOUR OWN FEELINGS**

When your child's life is touched by the suicide of a peer or a friend, you may find yourself experiencing a lot of different things about the same time. Initially, you will most likely be stunned by the death. Suicide is, in fact, a rare occurrence that is difficult for most of us to understand. When a young person makes the devastating choice, our personal sense of shock and confusion can be overwhelming. The questions of how and why did this happen are often fodder for neighborhood gossip and speculation. This is when it's so important to remember that suicide is a complex act that is always related to a variety of causes.

We may never know all the reasons for any suicide, and within this vacuum of complete and accurate information we are often presented with half-facts and speculation. Especially after the suicide of a young person, we tend to feel if we can ferret out the causes, we can protect ourselves, and our children, from a similar fate. And while it's true that understanding the risk factors and warning signs of suicide can be very helpful, we don't want to make judgments or assumptions about this particular death. So don't give in to random conversations about the reasons for death. The most important thing any of us can say is that this young person was not thinking clearly and made a terrible choice, and the cost was his or her life.

If you knew the deceased personally, you may feel a jumble of emotions yourself. Give yourself sometime to let the news settle. Expect shock to mix with sadness and helplessness. Ultimately, the fact that this youngster completed suicide will be less central to your emotions than the fact that he or she is dead and will be missed by you.

It is critical for you to take time to deal with your own feelings before you approach your child. Remember the directives from air travel about the use of oxygen masks – you must put on your own mask before you can help anyone else with theirs!

## **NEXT: HELP YOUR KIDS**

This initial response of shock may be followed quickly by concern for your own children. If your child had a personal relationship with the deceased, your child's grief should be your first priority. Grief in childhood looks differently than it does in adulthood. Children tend to experience intense feelings, such as those that accompany a significant loss, in short bursts. Such feelings normally pass quickly, which is why it's important to seize those "teachable moments" when the door to conversation about the death may be open.

Start by expressing your own sadness and confusion about the death, and then ask your child to share his or her reactions. Validate whatever you hear. *I can appreciate your sadness, confusion, anger, lack of understanding.* Be prepared for the classic response of "I don't know" and validate that too! *I understand when something like this happens, it can be hard to know how you feel.*

## **WHAT TO DO**

- Deal with your own reactions
- Avoid gossip about the causes
- Remain nonjudgmental about the deceased
- Share your reactions with your child
- Ask for his/her response and validate it
- Acknowledge rumors and put into context
- Underscore the dangerous behavior of the deceased
- Introduce topic of help seeking
- Keep channels of communication open!

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If you've been hearing rumors about the death, chances are your child has heard them also. Address the rumors with your child. *There are a lot of rumors floating around about what happened. Have you heard anything?* Explain that although some of the rumors may be true, they are only part of the story and we have to be careful not to make judgments based on limited information. Emphasize that the most important piece of the story is the fact that the deceased felt so terrible or was thinking so unclearly that he or she did not realize in the consequences of what he or she was doing. This is especially important to discuss if drugs or alcohol are implicated in the death. Remind your child, without preaching or lecturing, about the effects of drugs on impulse control and judgment.

Because children normally imitate or copy the behavior of peers, you may want to underscore the dangerous consequences of the deceased's behavior. Sometimes children are intrigued by the circumstances of a suicide completion or attempt, so it's essential to state **emphatically** that there can be a fine line between dangerous and deadly behavior – and their friend's death is a reflection of this. If they hear any of their friends talking about coping the behavior of the deceased, they need to tell an adult immediately!



This leads into the final part of the conversation: a discussion about help seeking. Emphasize that nothing in life is ever so terrible or devastating that suicide is the way to handle it. Ask your child to whom she or he would turn to for help with a serious problem. Hopefully, your name will be on the top of the list, but don't be upset if it isn't. Depending on your child's age, his or her allegiance may have shifted to peers. Agree that friends are a great resource but that when a problem is so big that suicide is being considered as its solution, it's essential to get help from an adult, too. Ask which adults your child views as helpful, especially with difficult problems. If the list is short or nonexistent, make some suggestions. Good choices can include other adult family member, school staff such as teachers, counselors, coaches or

the school nurse, clergy or youth ministers, a friend's parent and older siblings or even neighbors. This identity of the person is less important than the fact that your child recognizes the importance of sharing problems with a trusted adult.

You may also want to recognize that your child may be concerned about the well-being of a friend or classmate and that these same adults are a great resource in those situations, too. It's never good to keep worries about a friend to one's self, especially if the worrisome are about something as serious as suicide.

Revisit these messages about help seeking in other conversations. Unanswered questions and complicated feelings about a suicide linger, even if they are unspoken, and ignoring them does not make them go away. Talking about suicide can't plant the idea in your child's head. On the contrary, creating an open forum for discussion of difficult subjects like suicide can give your child the opportunity to recognize you as one of his trusted adults and will offer the chance to practice help seeking skills.