



# CHILDREN, TEENS AND **SUICIDE LOSS**



The Dougy Center

The National Center for Grieving Children & Families  
dougy.org



AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR  
Suicide Prevention

afsp.org



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HELPING  
YOUNG LOSS  
SURVIVORS

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# Taking Care of Yourself

One of the best ways to take care of a young person in the wake of a suicide loss is to make sure you take care of yourself, too. By practicing self-care, you serve as a role model to your children and reassure them they don't have to take care of you. Here are a few guidelines that promote healing:

## Be patient

Know that everyone grieves at their own pace and in their own way. Give yourself time.

## Attend to your physical needs

Eat nutritiously. Drink plenty of water. Get sleep and exercise.

## Seek support

Connect with family, friends, clergy, and others who will listen without judgment. Many people find that counseling helps them deal with their grief in healthy ways.

Reach out to other suicide loss survivors who understand what you're going through. Many communities have support groups where suicide loss survivors can share their loss experiences and coping strategies.

To find a support group near you, visit [afsp.org/SupportGroups](https://afsp.org/SupportGroups).

## Learn about suicide loss

Knowing what to expect may help you get through the more difficult times.

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# Understanding Suicide

There is no single cause of suicide. Many factors may contribute to a suicide death. Having an understanding of some of these factors may help you when you talk to young loss survivors.

Suicide most often occurs when stressors and health issues converge to create an experience of hopelessness and despair. Depression is the most common condition associated with suicide, and it is often undiagnosed or untreated. Most people who actively manage their mental health conditions lead fulfilling lives. Conditions like depression, anxiety, and substance use problems, especially when unaddressed, increase the risk for suicide.

## What are some of the reasons why people die by suicide?

There are three categories of risk factors (health, environmental, and historical) that, when present at the same time, increase the risk of suicide. Research provides evidence that biology and genetics play a large part in both mental health challenges and suicide.\*

### Health factors

- Mental health conditions such as depression; substance use disorders; bipolar disorder; schizophrenia and psychosis; personality traits of aggression, mood changes, and poor relationships; conduct disorder; and anxiety disorders
- Serious or chronic health condition and/or pain
- Traumatic brain injury

\*Kaschka, W.P., and D. Rujescu, eds. *Biological Basis of Suicide and Suicidal Behavior. Advances in Biological Psychiatry*. Vol. 30. Basel, Switzerland: Karger Medical and Scientific, 2015.



### **Environmental factors**

- Access to lethal means, including firearms and drugs
- Prolonged stress, such as harassment, bullying, relationship problems, and unemployment
- Stressful life events, which may include a death, divorce, or job loss
- Exposure to another person's suicide, or to graphic or sensationalized accounts of suicide

### **Historical factors**

- Previous suicide attempts
- Family history of suicide
- Abused as a child

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# Navigating the Immediate Aftermath

## HOW TO INFORM YOUNG PEOPLE OF A SUICIDE DEATH

### Tell the truth

Start with an honest, age-appropriate explanation of what happened to the person who died. Use short and simple sentences. Telling children and teens the truth using developmentally appropriate words is the best way to help them begin to process and adapt to the reality of the loss. It also shows them that the adults in their lives can be *trusted*.

### Don't wait

If the child is young, your first inclination may be to protect them from this terrible news. However, the best way to protect your child is by telling them the truth as soon as possible to make sure they hear it from you first. The risk in waiting is that children are quick to pick up on the fact that something is wrong. They may hear you or other adults talking, or find out from other children, the internet, or the news. Teens, in particular, are connected through social media, and news travels fast.

If a child does not have the whole picture, they will try to fill in the gaps with guesses — and what they imagine may be more upsetting than the truth. Children may also think that information is being withheld from them because they were somehow responsible, and they may blame themselves as a result. When they do find out the real story, they are likely to be angry and will wonder what other information has been withheld from them. If you need help talking with your child, seek it out, e.g., from a family member. You don't have to do this by yourself.

### Choose a safe space

Find a place to talk that feels safe and familiar to the child. For many children and teens, this will be their home, but if that's where the person died, home may no longer feel safe. Other familiar places, such as a relative's or family friend's house may be a good alternative.

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## Avoid graphic details

Share information about the death honestly but without talking at length about the specific method or going into graphic detail. Graphic images may be upsetting and can increase the risk of imitative behavior by vulnerable youth. If the child asks, it is okay to give basic facts, but the focus should be not on how someone killed themselves, but rather on how to cope with feelings of sadness, loss, anger, etc. Some children will want more information than others; let their questions guide your answers.

*It is tragic he died by hanging. Let's talk about how his death has affected you and ways for you to handle it.*

## Age-Specific Recommendations

**Note:** Children may be emotionally and cognitively older or younger than their age; please adapt the guidelines and examples below to your child's maturity level.

### Preschooler (3–5 years old)

Infants and toddlers experience loss and grieve when their caregiver is no longer physically present, though they may not have the words to describe certain emotions. Most will not have the ability to understand what death is or that it is forever. They will ask lots of questions, e.g., *"I know you said mommy is dead, but when is she coming home?"* Answer their questions as directly and consistently as possible.

*I have very sad news: your daddy died last night. "Died" means that his body stopped working. His heart is not beating, and he's not breathing. He doesn't need to eat or sleep, and he can't play with you anymore. We aren't going to see him again.*

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## Early elementary schooler (6–8 years old)

Many children at this age understand death is permanent, and the person who died is not coming back. They may worry that they somehow caused the death.

*I have something I need to tell you that is really hard. Mommy was found dead this morning when you were away at school. Mommy's brain was not working right. She died because she took more pills than you're supposed to take, and her body stopped working.*

## Later elementary schooler (9–12 years old)

At this age, most children understand death is permanent. They may also have an interest in how the body works, and have questions about what specifically caused the death.

*I know this is going to be really hard to hear... Your brother died today. The police are pretty sure it was suicide, meaning he killed himself. The Coast Guard found his body and performed CPR, but by the time they tried to help him, he had already drowned.*

**Note:** For general information and guidance on how to talk to others about what happened, visit [afsp.org/TalkingAboutWhatHappened](https://afsp.org/TalkingAboutWhatHappened).

Why did you do it?  
Suicide



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## **GUIDING YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH THE PRACTICAL REALITIES AFTER A SUICIDE DEATH**

### **Should children or teens attend the funeral or memorial service?**

Offer your child or teen the choice to attend the funeral or memorial service, regardless of their age. Having the choice to be involved lets a young person know they are a valued and important part of the family. Ask for their ideas on what to include in the service (e.g., flowers, music, photos, special rituals). If possible, allow them to put something in the casket or urn, such as drawings, letters, favorite toys, or sentimental objects. Teens may want to do something special, such as put a video together or choose the music to be played.

If your child decides to attend, talk with them about what to expect. Where will the service be held? Will the body of the person who died be there? Who else will be there? How long will the service last? It's also helpful to give them an idea of what other people might do or say. Consider role-playing in advance so they can practice how to respond to things people commonly say, such as "I'm so sorry for your loss," "They're in a better place now," or "You have to be strong."

With younger children it's a good idea to identify a trusted friend or family member as their "buddy," someone who can take them to the restroom or outside for a break if they need it.

### **Should my child view the body?**

Give children informed choices about whether or not to view the body of the person who died based on the information that you have. Give them a clear sense of what to expect, and talk with them about how seeing the body might be difficult, but also how it might be helpful to them. Reassure them that they can change their mind, even at the last second.

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For some, seeing the body helps them to understand that the person is dead. It can also make it easier for young children to grasp that the person's body is no longer working. If viewing the whole body is not possible, find out from the funeral director whether the child could see part of the person's body.

If you don't want to see the body but your child does, see if a family member or friend is willing to join them. Speak to the person who will accompany the child before the viewing to prepare them to answer questions that the child may ask.

## **What can I do if my child saw the death happen or found the body?**

Ask your child about what they may have seen, heard, and felt. Don't overload them with questions, but acknowledge their experience, and allow them to share what they are thinking, feeling, and worried about. It may be helpful to have another adult present if you are concerned about how you might react to what you are told.

*Can you tell me what happened? What are you worried about right now? What can I do to help you?*

Some children will have night terrors, flashback images, fears, and insecurities. Other behaviors they might exhibit include needing to be around an adult at all times or wanting to be alone. Young children may revert to earlier behaviors such as wetting the bed, thumb-sucking, having tantrums, having difficulty talking, and hitting, kicking, or biting.

If your child discovered the body or saw the death happen, they may benefit from meeting with a professional counselor who can help them process the experience.

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## What if the body is never found or the person is missing and presumed dead?

If there is no body, you and your children may have a difficult time believing that the person who's missing is really dead, or that they died of suicide.

Even if you don't know what happened, you can grieve the person's absence. Some people worry that if they grieve openly, it will appear as if they've given up all hope that the person is still alive. Reassure yourself and your children that you can still grieve while holding out hope.

*Your mother isn't here with us now. Whether or not she is found, it's okay to be sad about missing her.*



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# Helping Young People Cope and Heal

## CREATING A SPACE FOR HEALING

### Listen without judgment

When young people are grieving, adults can be quick to offer them advice, give opinions, and make judgments. Listen without judging, interpreting, or evaluating. With young children especially, sometimes the best response is to simply repeat what they've said so they know they've been heard (e.g., *"You really miss your mom, especially when you wake up in the morning"*). Once children or teens trust that you will listen and be understanding, they'll be more likely to come to you when they're hurting or in need of advice. If they're not ready to talk about what they're experiencing, reassure them that you are available to them whenever they do want to talk.

Many children worry that asking questions will upset the adult. Reassure them that it's okay to ask any questions they might have, even if it might be emotional for you.

### Provide routines and consistency

Life is often in upheaval after a death. Try to find ways to create safety and predictability for the child so they know what to expect. Consider creating routines around bedtime, after-school activities (e.g., *"Homework is done by 7 p.m."*), or meals.

Do allow for some flexibility, however, so that children can trust that, if they need a break from a given routine, their world will be responsive (e.g., *"You can take a break from homework now and come back to it later"*).

For teenagers, routines and boundaries can provide a sense of safety and security during uncertain times. They may test and fight such boundaries, but ultimately most find comfort in knowing someone is paying attention to their lives and looking out for them.

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## Let them decide

Since a death can leave young people feeling powerless, allowing them to make choices can help re-establish a sense of control. These choices can be simple and everyday (e.g., “*Do you want to wear your red or purple T-shirt?*”) or more complex, such as participating in the memorial service or sorting through the belongings of the person who died.

While you may be inclined to become extra vigilant following a suicide death, it is important that teens be able to make some choices for themselves. Balance your teen’s freedom with oversight, and make sure that the friends they choose to spend time with are not encouraging high-risk behavior or negative coping skills. Do keep in mind that some of a grieving teen’s friends may avoid the teen simply because they don’t know how to respond to the death.

## Create rituals around holidays and anniversaries

You may want to mark significant days such as the birthday of the person who died, the anniversary of their death, and traditional holidays like Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and year-end holidays by remembering the person who died in a meaningful way. Involve children and teens in commemorative activities without forcing them. These activities may include visiting the gravesite, going to a special place, sharing a favorite meal, lighting a candle, and sharing memories.

## Remember and talk about the person who died

Even though remembering is an important part of grieving, it is often avoided when the cause of death was suicide. Don’t be afraid to talk about and remember the person who died, and encourage other family members to do the same.

You might say, “*Your mom really liked this song,*” or “*Your dad made the best pizza.*” By doing this, you give children permission to share their own feelings and memories.

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## Let them choose keepsakes and mementos

Children often like to keep objects that belonged to the person who died or that had some significance to them. Consider making copies of photos for young children so that they can carry them around without damaging the originals. Rather than guess what keepsakes, clothing, or pictures a child might like, ask which ones are important to them. If the child doesn't feel up to choosing keepsakes yet, you can put items in a box for them to go through once they are ready.

## Make time for play and relaxation

Make sure children get a break from the seriousness of grief, and give them opportunities to have fun. If you do not feel up to playing yet, consider asking a relative or family friend to play with your child. When you're able to, join your child in these times of recreation and creativity. Seeing you play and have fun can reassure your child that your family is going to be okay.

Teens, too, need time to relax, listen to music, be with their friends, or be by themselves. Encourage them to keep up with extracurricular activities that they're good at, such as sports, band, etc. These types of activities tend to be the first to fall by the wayside after a loss, but it's important for teens to feel successful at something they enjoy.

## MAINTAINING AN OPEN DIALOGUE

Open and truthful communication in the days, months, and years that follow a suicide loss will help children continue to process and make meaning of the death.

It's normal for children to have a lot of questions, and for young children in particular to ask the same ones repeatedly. This doesn't mean you're doing a bad job of explaining. Death is a hard concept for anyone to understand, especially for a child who hasn't experienced a loss before. Over time, their questions may change, and the answers you provide may take on new meaning.



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If a question comes up that you don't know the answer to, don't feel you need to be definitive; it's okay to say, *"This is the best guess I have."* Start by sharing your thoughts, then invite the children to share their own ideas.

Here are some questions that often arise after a suicide loss, and suggestions on how to respond. Adjust your answers to the child's maturity level, as needed.

### **Why did they do this?**

*You know, I have that question, too. We may never have all the answers as to why your mom killed herself. There are some things that we do know, though. She felt hopeless, and was drinking too much, and that probably made her think she didn't want to be alive anymore.*

### **Who will take care of me if you die?**

*There will always be someone to take care of you. Is there someone you'd prefer to take care of you if I should die? Why would you choose them? Is there someone you would not choose?*

*I have made a plan with your aunt and uncle; they love you very much and will take care of you if something should happen to me. Even though we never know when we will die, I plan to live for a very long time and take care of you the best that I can.*

### **Will you die by suicide? Will I die like that, too?**

*I don't intend to die by suicide. If I ever started to think about it, I would tell someone and get help. If you ever think about it, you can tell me [and/or another adult], and I will get you help. Can we agree that we will both do that?*

*Just because your brother died by suicide doesn't mean you or I will, but it is important that you talk about it if you start to have thoughts about suicide.*

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## **Did I do something to make the person die? Is it my fault?**

*You are not responsible for causing the suicide death of another, and a child is never responsible for the actions of a parent or sibling. Sometimes it may feel as if it was our fault, but it wasn't. When someone dies by suicide, it is no one's fault; it is often because the person was in so much pain they needed to stop the pain, and the only way they knew to stop it was to die.*

## **Did I not love him enough? Did she not love me?**

*I know you loved your mom very much. Unfortunately, when someone is not well, love isn't all that is needed. Just like love can't make the flu go away, your mom needed treatment for what was making her hurt. Mommy loved you very much. Do you know that the day you were born was one of the happiest days of her life? Unfortunately, mommy had a lot of emotional pain in her life, and even though you were such a joy in her life, that pain was too much for her, and she couldn't see another way to escape it except by ending her life.*

## **Why would they leave me?**

*If your dad had been thinking clearly, he would never have wanted to leave you. Sometimes when people are feeling hopeless, they are only focused on ending the pain that they are in. He had a lot of pain in his life. It was not you that he wanted to leave behind, but the pain.*

## **What should I say to people who ask me how the person died?**

What you and your family decide to tell other people is very personal. Practice with your child or teen what they might say in response, and encourage a truthful, brief reply. If they want to answer the question, a possible response might be, "My dad died of suicide." If the method is mentioned at all, it should be very brief, e.g., "He shot himself." If your child doesn't want to respond to the question in that moment, they can say, "I don't want to talk about that right now." Still, keep in mind your child's peers may find out what happened regardless, especially with the presence of social media, and that they may ask questions. It's

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wise to have brief answers prepared, as well as responses to possible follow-up questions.

### **Where do people go after they die of suicide?**

The answer to this question will depend on your personal beliefs. Some people believe that when you die, you go to heaven; some believe in reincarnation; some say the spirit lives on; some believe that death is the end. Answering according to your beliefs may help your child find their own meaning.

## **DEALING WITH REMINDERS OF THE LOSS**

### **What should I do with the room and possessions of the person who died? How do I handle things like clothes and other physical reminders?**

Grieving is not necessarily about letting go, but rather about figuring out how to live life without the physical presence of the person who died. What belongings or reminders of the person you choose to hold onto or get rid of, and the timeframe in which you make those decisions, is up to you. If people in your family have differing ideas about what to keep or discard, work together to find a compromise. For instance, photos can be in one particular room that you and your children may choose to go into or not, rather than out in the kitchen or living room.

### **What if my child wants to avoid the location of the death or reminders of the person who died?**

Some people want to avoid places, activities, or objects closely connected to the person who died (e.g., your teen may avoid driving by the diner where they used to go with the person who died), while others may be drawn to them: there is no right or wrong response. The former is only a problem if the avoidance behavior starts to affect daily routines and functioning, e.g., if a child stops going to school because it's too hard

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not to have dad waiting to pick them up at the end of the day. If this is the case, additional support may be needed.

If the death happened at home, find out where in the house your child feels safest, and try to make arrangements to accommodate those feelings. In addition, be sure to monitor whether their sense of safety changes over time. As time passes, some children gradually begin to feel more comfortable in the home, while others may not. It is important you attend to your child's need for safety as much as possible.

### **How can I prepare my child for unexpected reminders?**

Unexpected reminders are inevitable. It might be a song on the radio, running into someone who doesn't know the person died, or automatically picking up the phone to call the person.

Help your child come up with a plan for when they come across a reminder that catches them off guard. This could be taking three deep breaths, talking to a trusted friend or adult, thinking of a happy memory, looking at a picture from a happy time, writing in a journal, hugging a favorite stuffed animal, or some other healthy activity that works for them.

### **What do I do with the suicide note?**

Most people who die by suicide do not leave a note. If no message was left, loss survivors may wonder why there wasn't, or what the message might have said if there had been one. For those who did receive a message, it can be hard to know what to do with the letter, email, or text that was left behind. Do you keep it, knowing it represents the last words the person communicated? If the note, written in a dark moment filled with pain, is particularly upsetting, do you destroy it? Do you let your children see or hear it? Whatever your inclination, try not to make a hasty decision.

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Many families choose to share the note with the child when they are older, depending on the content of the communication. Whatever your decision, it is good to be truthful about whether a note was left or not. If you choose to have the older child read the note, it is helpful to do it with them and make sure that they can put the message into the appropriate context (e.g., that it was likely written during a time when the person was confused, in a lot of pain, etc.).

## **MANAGING THE RETURN TO SCHOOL**

### **When should my child go back to school?**

For some children, returning to a familiar routine as quickly as possible is comforting. For others, it can be helpful to take some time away, whether it is going on a family vacation, spending time with other relatives, or being outdoors. Talk with your child and ask when they feel ready to go back. If they express hesitation about returning, help them sort through their specific worries. Come up with a plan to comfortably transition back into school. Discussing with them what to say and how to handle questions and responses from their classmates may give them some confidence.

### **How do I work with the school in supporting my child? What information should I share with the school staff?**

Talking with the staff at your child's school can help ease the transition back to the classroom. Those who work directly with your child can become part of their support system. It's good to keep in mind that attempts to keep the death a secret usually don't work, and rumors may be more hurtful than the truth. Talking openly about the death, and coaching your child or teen on how to respond to questions from peers and adults can help reduce the secrecy and shame sometimes associated with suicide.

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If your child doesn't want to tell people at school what happened, it is still wise to let their teachers and the school counselor know they may need additional support. Bear in mind that not all school personnel may be as understanding of this difficult subject as one might hope. Encourage them to recognize the child's loss, but to refrain from identifying the child solely in terms of the loss. It may also be helpful to point school administrators to additional resources such as AFSP's *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*: [afsp.org/AfterASuicideToolkit](https://afsp.org/AfterASuicideToolkit).

## **How can my child talk about the suicide death with other children or adults at school?**

Give your child the option of how, when, where, and with whom they want to share information about the loss. Regardless of whether they choose to share at school or aren't ready to do so, help them formulate answers and practice what words to say.

*My dad killed himself.*

*My mom ended her life.*

*My brother took his life.*

*Daddy lost his battle with depression.*

*My sister died last week, that is all I want to say right now.*

*I really don't want to talk about it.*

## **What special academic needs might my child have after the suicide death?**

Grief takes up a lot of space in our minds, making it difficult to concentrate. Here are some strategies that can help children in school after a loss:

- Arrange for some flexibility with their school workload
- Have a friend help them with assignments

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- Create a safety plan for hard days that might include visiting the school counselor or, for young children, being allowed to call you from school, just sitting quietly with a book, or coloring for a while; with teens, decide together what they should do if they have a hard day, and how you (or someone else) will respond in that case

### **What if other children avoid or tease my child?**

If your child is isolated or being teased, talk with teachers, school administrators, and parents, and encourage them to address the underlying worries and misinformation the other children are experiencing, and start a conversation to increase understanding and empathy.



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# Understanding Suicide Grief in Children and Teens

It's important that as you go through the grief process along with your child, you do your best not to judge their words or behaviors. Instead, listen actively and openly, and try to understand the range of emotions and concerns they may be experiencing.

## What's normal for my child to do, say, and feel?

During a time of grief, emotions might come all at once, like a flood, or show up one by one, over a long period of time. Children and teens may not show any outward signs of grief, or they may express their feelings through their behaviors, physical complaints, or questions. Bear in mind some displays of emotion that seem unrelated to loss may in fact have grief at their root. If you sense this might be the case, be sure to encourage conversation during a calm moment.

Some common emotions children experience when a loved one dies of suicide are:

- **Sadness:** A profound and pervasive sadness may saturate happy memories from the past, or wishful dreams for the future.
- **Fear:** Your child may fear that someone else in their life will die. Other common fears include being alone, being around a lot of people, going to sleep (especially if the child has nightmares), and being away from caregivers. You might notice your child's fears growing more intense close to significant days and holidays.
- **Anxiety:** Children may become anxious about what will happen next in their lives, hyper-vigilant about their immediate surroundings, and sensitive to any changes. They may also be keenly sensitive to stories of other suicide deaths or of injustices in the world. Teens may worry about how the death will affect future plans, such as attending college.

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- **Hopelessness:** Some children express a sense of hopelessness after a suicide death. There may be a sense that the grief, pain, and suffering will never end.
  - **Anger:** Children might be angry with the person who died, with you, and/or themselves for not being able to prevent the death. As they grow older, they may feel increasingly angry as they become more aware of how the loss has affected their life.
  - **Guilt:** Children might feel they should have done or said (or not done or said) something to keep the person from dying, or they may worry they weren't good or nice to the person who died. If a teen is grieving the death of a younger sibling, they may feel guilty for not having been more protective.
  - **Shame:** The negative judgments of others about the death or about the person who died can leave children feeling embarrassed or ashamed. Talking openly about suicide can help reduce this shame and show them how to respond to those judgments.
  - **Relief:** If the person who died struggled with mental illness, substance use and addiction, or violent impulses, children may feel relieved that the chaos the person brought into their lives is over. Relief is often closely followed by guilt. Reassure them that having a sense of relief doesn't mean they wanted or caused the person to die.

## What additional relationship-specific issues may come up?

Be aware of any new and changing dynamics within your family. It is very common for conflicts to arise following a loss. Give your loved ones the space they need, while encouraging open and honest communication.

### Distant or conflict-filled relationships

If the relationship between your child or teen and the person who died had a lot of conflict or disappointment — particularly if the person struggled with mental illness, substance abuse, or physical pain — the

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child will likely have many complicated thoughts and feelings. Losing the dream of the relationship one day getting better can be heartbreaking.

They may also have questions for you about your relationship with the person who died. Be honest and acknowledge difficulties in the relationship if they existed. You do not need to provide details about your relationship, but especially if the child witnessed struggles in the relationship, it is important to recognize them and provide some context (e.g., *“Your dad and I sometimes had a hard time getting along, particularly when he was very depressed or angry”*).

Extending the child a no-pressure invitation to talk about their relationship with the person who died, or sharing your own experience to spark a conversation, can help relieve some of the child’s stress.

### **Sibling death**

If it was your child’s brother or sister who died, they may feel guilt, anxiety, fear, shame, and embarrassment. They may feel guilty about being the one who is still alive, or for what they said and did (or didn’t say or do) to their sibling. Some children regret not being closer with or nicer to their sibling. They may feel it was their responsibility to protect their sibling and that they failed to do that. Be sure to address these perceived responsibilities, for instance by providing information about mental health issues.

What children regret is often tied to their developmental level. A very young child might feel guilty for not sharing their toys, while an older child or teen might regret not asking their sibling more questions about who they were and what they liked. They may also regret arguments they had with their sibling.

Remember that conflict and blame may also arise between remaining siblings. Be aware of changing behavior and aggression.

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## Parent death

If it was the child's parent or caregiver who died, they may worry about who will take care of them, or whether something will happen to you as well. They may worry that they will die of suicide, too.

If the death means there will be major changes in your family structure, where you live, or your financial situation, answer your child's questions and provide reassurances. Let young children know they still get to be children, and there are adults who will take care of things. Reiterate that you will get support of your own, and that it is not their job to take care of you — it is the job of the entire family to help support one another.



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# Deciding if Your Child Needs Added Support

Some children may benefit from additional support to help them navigate and process complicated emotions.

## How should I respond if my child says he or she wants to die?

It is normal for young loss survivors to long to see or be with the person who died. They may think that if they die they will be reunited with the person they lost. Acknowledge their wish to see the person who died, but affirm that they have a life to live, and that the person who died would want them to continue to live life to the fullest.

*I know you really want to be with mommy right now. I really want that, too. It is okay for us to miss her terribly. But I know that mommy would want us to live a long, full, and happy life, and we still have a lot of it to live.*

*I hear that you really want to be with daddy. I know it hurts to not be with him. Daddy would be really sad if we didn't continue to live our lives. There are so many things we can do to keep daddy with us. Is there something like a photo or a stuffed animal that would help you feel close to daddy right now?*

While these expressions of wanting to be with the person who died are common, it is important to dig deeper to understand whether these are passive wishes or truly suicidal thoughts. Ask your child or teen if they are thinking about or have plans to kill themselves. If you are concerned, consult a qualified mental health professional.

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## **Are my children at higher risk for future problems because of this death?**

Due to factors such as genetics, learned behavior, and social environment, having a family member die by suicide may put children at greater risk for suicidal thoughts. However, when adults allow children to express their emotions, when they set consistent and clear boundaries, and when they meet their children's cognitive and physical needs, children are likely to thrive, even in the face of grief.

## **How will I know if my child needs professional help?**

While most children and teens are ultimately able to adapt after a suicide loss, some are at risk for developing depression, difficulties at school, anxiety, or other challenges. While friends, family, or a support group may provide enough help for most children, some may benefit from working with a qualified mental health professional.

Changes in a person's sleeping patterns, eating habits, emotions, and behaviors are common after a death, but they become more concerning if they interfere with day-to-day life. Here are some indicators that children may need professional support:

- Loss of interest in hobbies and friends
- Ongoing difficulty sleeping or eating
- Engaging in high-risk behaviors
- Aggressiveness toward themselves (e.g., engaging in self-harm) or others (e.g., getting into fights)
- Suicidal thoughts or behaviors

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Suicide bereavement counseling will not prevent the child from feeling the pain of grief, but it can help to identify pressing concerns and needs, and address them in healthy and productive ways.

## **How can I find a qualified mental health professional who understands the issues of suicide bereavement?**

Trust your feelings. Choose a therapist who makes you feel comfortable and understood. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Does the therapist have experience and training in grief and sudden loss, and in working with children or teens? Are they comfortable working with suicide loss survivors? What is their treatment philosophy, what are their methods? An informed grief counselor will recognize the individual needs of each person's grief, and won't try to fit a client's grief process into a particular theory or force someone to share before they are ready.



# FOCUS ON TEENS

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# Helping Teens Cope and Heal

## CREATING A SPACE FOR HEALING

### Listen

Many adults in a teen's life are telling them what they should be doing and how they should be doing it. Make time and create space away from daily distractions and responsibilities, and invite the teen to share with you. Let them tell you about their experience of grief, about pondering confusing questions, or about their life in general — and just listen.

### Model coping behavior

Many teens have an innate hypocrisy/double-standard detector, so try not to tell them how to deal with grief if you aren't following your own advice. If you encourage them, for instance, to express emotion, talk outwardly about their feelings, and keep up with their normal routine as much as possible, make sure that you are doing those things, too. Furthermore, many teens who are experiencing grief don't know how to express that grief in healthy ways. They may not be aware of certain social norms, acceptable behaviors, or therapeutic expressions of grief. By watching the adults around them, including you, they can learn what might work for them, try out different ways to grieve, and successfully and healthily move forward with their lives.

### Provide privacy

Allow for and respect a teen's privacy to grieve and express themselves. They are grappling with a lot, and their self-esteem and sense of being may be fragile. They may also be more reliant on peer relationships than adult relationships during this time. Allowing a teen some personal space can decrease tension. Keep in mind, however, that their social environment may have changed in the wake of their loss. Be on the alert for risky behaviors such as drug or alcohol use, promiscuity, and smoking. If you are concerned for their physical safety or emotional

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well-being, you may want to let them know you will respect their privacy as long as you feel they are not harming themselves or someone else, or being harmed by others.

### **Encourage remembering**

After a suicide death, many teens will encounter social stigma. This can make them feel uncomfortable or unwilling to talk about the person who died. Teens benefit from remembering and talking about the person they lost, however. Encourage them to share memories, tell stories, ask questions, and establish rituals. Continue to provide opportunities for teens to share and remember in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

### **Take breaks**

Encourage teens to have some fun, laugh, spend time with friends, do things they enjoy, and exercise. It's important to recognize that the death is just one aspect of the teenager's life; give them permission to take a break from grief and explore other parts of their lives. In addition, since many teens set unrealistic expectations for themselves, providing and encouraging healthy outlets can help reduce the amount of stress they may be experiencing.



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# Understanding Suicide Grief in Teens

## NAVIGATING THE WEEKS AND MONTHS TO COME

### **My teen is not talking to me. How can I encourage sharing?**

Peers are the primary support system for most teens; it is not uncommon for a teen to seek support from their friends rather than family. They may share everything with their friends and nothing with their parents. What's important is making sure that your teen is getting the support they need, whether it be from you, friends, or other trusted adults (e.g., a coach, teacher, or counselor). You can simply ask, *"Are you getting the support you need? If not, let's talk about how I can help."*

### **My teen doesn't want to talk about the death at all, OR my teen only wants to talk about the death. What do I do?**

Everyone processes grief differently. For some teens it will be important to talk and share stories about the person who died. Others won't want to verbalize what they're feeling or experiencing. Some may choose to express their grief in other ways, such as writing or other creative arts, or through activities like playing sports, going for a hike, etc.

You and your teen may well have different styles of grieving. You may want to talk about the death, whereas your teen may find that being alone is most helpful. Acknowledge that it is okay to choose different activities or ways to grieve, and be respectful and patient toward one another.

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## **How do I balance my teen's desire for privacy about the death with the inevitability of people finding out?**

Many teens want and need privacy. They often don't want others to know that a person in their life has died. Allow your teen to make the choice about what is shared and with whom; having discussions with them about that will provide you with an opportunity to learn about your teen's concerns. Be aware that others may find out about the suicide death through rumors, social media, the news, etc. Prepare your teen for that possibility and discuss ways to handle it.

## **How do I help my teen cope with the media/social media after a suicide death?**

Social media can be a strong source of support for teens who are grieving. It can also present negative, false, and unhelpful responses. Having a discussion about hurtful comments, and about ways to share information, will be useful to the teen. Parents should set appropriate limits regarding the amount of time spent on these sites, and maintain oversight of the content being shared. If the deceased had a social media account, it is often helpful to review any comments that may have been posted there following the death as they may provide information about how others, including your teen, are coping with the death.

## **How do I help protect my teen from intrusive or negative comments?**

Rumors, gossip, and unwelcome questions in the wake of a suicide death are common. If your teen has a response to intrusive or negative comments at the ready, they will be less challenging to handle.

*I don't really want to talk about it right now.  
That comment is very hurtful to me; you know my  
brother just died.  
It really is none of your business.*

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## **What do I say if my teen suspected or knew something was wrong?**

Teens, more than younger children, may have known or suspected that the deceased person was suicidal. The person who died may even have talked to them about suicide. If that's the case, your teen may feel they should have taken that conversation more seriously, told someone about their concerns, or done something to stop the death. Try to acknowledge your teen's fears and guilt before prematurely jumping in to offer reassurance. Teens tend to withdraw if they believe someone is trying to make them feel better without first understanding what they're experiencing.

## **What if the person who died was a friend or classmate of your teen?**

Relationships with friends are frequently seen as more important and influential to teens than family relationships. Therefore, the suicide death of a friend may affect the teen in a significant way. Teens might struggle with survivor guilt or guilt from feeling they could have been a better friend or should have done something to intervene. The loss of a classmate can also challenge a teen's sense of security and increase their awareness of their own mortality.

## **My teen wants to spend all of her time at her deceased friend's house. Is that normal?**

Many teens find it comforting to be in the environment where they spent time, had fun, and shared deep connections and memories with the person who died. As long as their presence is welcome, and being at the friend's house is not interfering with their health and safety, there is no reason for concern. However, it is okay to set some boundaries. Help your teen find a balance between time spent at home and time spent at their friend's house.

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## FACILITATING THE RETURN TO SCHOOL

### How can I support my teen's return to school?

Some teens will choose to go back to school quickly after the death, finding the routine and structure comforting; others may need more time. Give your teen a reasonable timeframe for returning to school. Prepare them for some of the challenges they may face, and develop strategies for dealing with them.

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#### **Lack of concentration and focus**

Meet with the school counselor and teacher to come up with an adapted work plan; have a study buddy to help with assignments.

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#### **Emotions coming on without warning**

Arrange with teachers to be allowed to leave class if needed; keep a journal or diary to write in when needed; establish a relationship with a school counselor or other school official they can check in with on a daily basis.

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#### **Peer rejection and/or hurtful comments**

Discuss ways to handle the comments; get support from friends who understand; find a support group of other teens who have experienced a suicide death (or a general bereavement group, if not available).

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#### **Outbursts**

Develop a plan for when strong emotions surface (e.g., take a walk, play a sport); establish routines and boundaries; find support with a mental health professional or support group.

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## **How do I find a balance between accommodating their grief and school demands?**

Help your teen determine what they can and cannot handle, and help them evaluate this on an ongoing basis. Most teens won't know their limit until they get in over their heads, so give them permission to let things go (e.g., extra school activities) or to ask for a reduced homework load if they have trouble keeping up. Each teen grieves differently and will need to learn to balance the demands of school, home, and friends for themselves. Be supportive and flexible as they try to find that balance, and provide a listening ear and advice when asked.

## **SUICIDAL THINKING AND SUICIDE RISK**

A grieving teen often looks and sounds like any other teen in many ways. It can be difficult to sort out which behaviors may be related to grieving and which have to do with the many challenges of adolescence. Regardless, any of your teen's actions that are concerning, and that may compromise their safety, should be taken seriously. Further evaluation by a mental health professional can help address your concerns.

## **Should I be concerned about drug or alcohol use or other risky behaviors?**

Teens usually resort to drugs or alcohol to numb or avoid feelings. Teens may also engage in other risky behaviors (e.g., driving recklessly, cutting themselves, or having unprotected sex) as a way of coping with intense emotions related to their loss. Encourage your teen to find healthier ways to deal with their grief, such as talking with friends, attending a support group, getting help from a counselor, exercising, getting out in nature, or pursuing a hobby (e.g., painting or playing an instrument).

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## **Does talking about suicide encourage teens to think about suicide?**

The topic of suicide is already present in many teens' lives through depictions in movies, video games, books, news, and social media. Talking about suicide does not put the idea of ending one's life in a teen's mind. However, it is wise to avoid exposure to graphic images and messages about suicide in the media and movies, particularly in the period immediately following a loss.

## **Is my teen at risk of becoming suicidal?**

It is important to remember that the vast majority of teens who experience very stressful life events do *not* become suicidal. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are not the natural consequence of serious life stressors. Teens who go through extremely difficult and painful experiences may feel intense sadness, loss, anxiety, anger, or a sense of abandonment. They may have the occasional thought that they would be better off dead. But this doesn't mean they are actively suicidal. For most teens, such events do not trigger persistent ruminations about death or a genuine desire to end their life. If they do, however, having your teen speak with a mental health professional is a reasonable next step.

## **What can I do if my teen is thinking or talking about suicide?**

It is not uncommon for teens to express verbally or in writing that they want to be with the person who died, or that they want to kill themselves. A teen's risk for suicide depends on many factors, including the full context of the teen's life, the degree to which the teen's usual behavior and personality have changed, and known risk factors. You can find more information about known risk factors at [afsp.org/signs](https://afsp.org/signs).

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Any talk about suicide should be taken seriously and pursued further, including through an evaluation by a mental health professional, if needed. Other changes in the teen's behavior that last beyond a month, seem to come out of nowhere, and are drastic, severe, and/or harmful (e.g., substance use) should be of major concern and cause for conversation and mental health intervention.

Here are some possible ways to start the conversation.

*I know it's been really tough lately. I've seen you withdraw from your friends, and I am wondering if you are finding the support you need.*

*I want to ask a question because I care about you and I noticed that you seem to be really missing your mom lately. You also seem to be really down, and I am wondering if you're having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life.*

*I have noticed you seem to be taking some risks with your safety: not wearing your seatbelt, driving a bit recklessly, ... I'm wondering if you feel depressed and might be thinking about suicide, too.*

If any suicidal thinking is evident, ask open-ended follow-up questions to find out the extent and context of your teen's suicidal thoughts or plans.

*Can you tell me more about these thoughts you're experiencing?*

*Help me understand where your mind goes from there.*

**Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255), text HELLO to the Crisis Text Line at 741-741, or take your teen to the hospital emergency room if there is a crisis situation.**

# CONCLUSION AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Caring for grieving children and teens is not an easy task, especially after a suicide death, but you don't have to do it alone. Recovering from a loss is a lifelong journey, but there are many resources available to help families navigate it. These include the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families, the National Alliance for Grieving Children, and individual mental health professionals.

**Questions? Please reach out to:**

- The Dougy Center at [help@dougy.org](mailto:help@dougy.org) or (503) 775-5683
- AFSP Loss & Healing Department at [survivingsuicideloss@afsp.org](mailto:survivingsuicideloss@afsp.org) or (212) 363-3500

## **RESOURCES FOR CHILD AND TEEN LOSS SURVIVORS**

**The Dougy Center, the National Center for Grieving Children & Families**

[dougy.org](http://dougy.org)

**National Alliance for Grieving Children**

[childrengrieve.org](http://childrengrieve.org)

**When Families Grieve (Sesame Street)**

[www-tc.pbs.org/parents/whenfamiliesgrieve/documents/TLC3gp\\_CGG\\_ENGdigital\\_sm.pdf](http://www-tc.pbs.org/parents/whenfamiliesgrieve/documents/TLC3gp_CGG_ENGdigital_sm.pdf)

**When Families Grieve (Sesame Street) (military families)**

[www-tc.pbs.org/parents/whenfamiliesgrieve/documents/TLC3mf\\_CGG\\_ENGdigital\\_sm.pdf](http://www-tc.pbs.org/parents/whenfamiliesgrieve/documents/TLC3mf_CGG_ENGdigital_sm.pdf)

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## Children's Bereavement Camps

### Suicide Loss:

#### Camp Kita

[campkita.com](http://campkita.com)

#### Alex Blackwood Foundation for Hope (Camp Alex)

[alexblackwood.com](http://alexblackwood.com)

### Military Loss:

#### TAPS (Good Grief Camps)

[taps.org](http://taps.org)

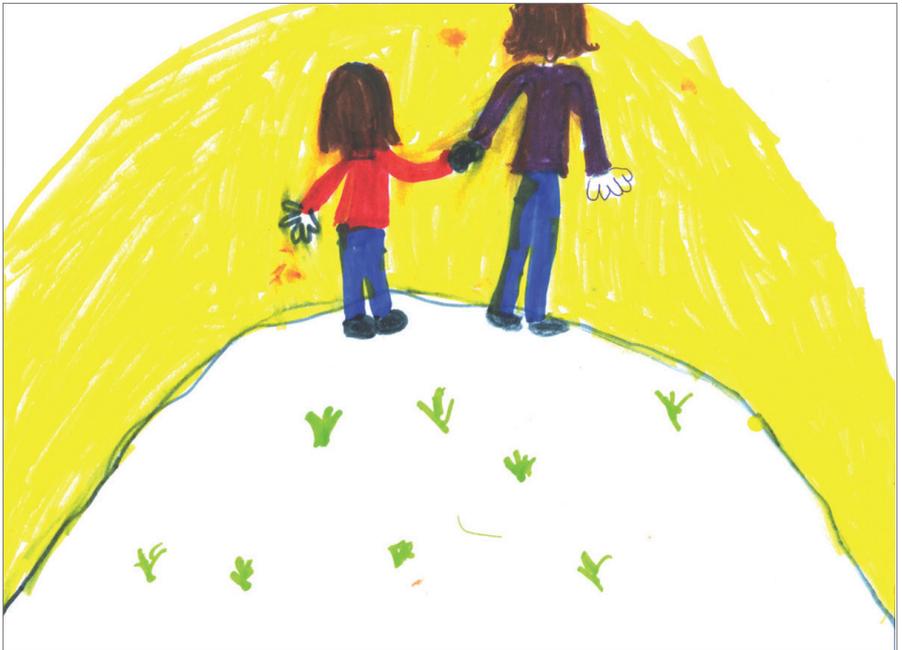
### General Loss:

#### Moyer Foundation (Camp Erin)

[moyerfoundation.org](http://moyerfoundation.org)

#### Comfort Zone Camp

[comfortzonecamp.org](http://comfortzonecamp.org)



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## RESOURCES FOR SUICIDE LOSS SURVIVORS

### **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**

[afsp.org/suicidelos](https://afsp.org/suicidelos)

### **American Association of Suicidology**

[suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/suicide-loss-survivors](https://suicidology.org/suicide-survivors/suicide-loss-survivors)

### **Alliance of Hope for Suicide Survivors**

[allianceofhope.org](https://allianceofhope.org)

### **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (military loss)**

[taps.org/suicide](https://taps.org/suicide)

### **Suicide Prevention Resource Center**

[sprc.org](https://sprc.org)

### **American Psychiatric Association**

[psychiatry.org](https://psychiatry.org)

### **American Psychological Association**

[apa.org](https://apa.org)

## RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS

### **After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools**

[afsp.org/our-work/education/after-a-suicide-a-toolkit-for-schools](https://afsp.org/our-work/education/after-a-suicide-a-toolkit-for-schools)

### **National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement**

[sowkweb.usc.edu/about/centers-affiliations/national-center-school-crisis-and-bereavement](https://sowkweb.usc.edu/about/centers-affiliations/national-center-school-crisis-and-bereavement)

## RESOURCES ON SUICIDE PREVENTION

### **About risk factors and warning signs**

[afsp.org/signs](https://afsp.org/signs)

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## THE DOUGY CENTER

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist bereaved youth and families.

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## THE AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention is dedicated to saving lives and bringing hope to those affected by suicide. AFSP creates a culture that's smart about mental health through education and community programs, develops suicide prevention through research and advocacy, and provides support for those affected by suicide.

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The Dougy Center

*The National Center for Grieving Children & Families*  
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AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR  
Suicide Prevention

afsp.org