



## Tips for Explaining a Suicide Death to a Child

*Unfortunately, many children lose a parent or sibling to suicide deaths. Explaining suicide to children can be uncomfortable for adults, but children need to be told the truth, in age-appropriate terms.*

1. Tell the child that the person died by suicide, which means that he chose to end his life.
2. Explain that the person had a sickness in the brain that caused a problem in his thinking. (depression, mental illness, addiction, etc.). The sickness caused him to feel so sad and lonely that he didn't want to live anymore. Sometimes when people feel this way, they decide to do something to cause their body to stop working.
3. The decision about whether or not to tell the child the manner of suicide depends upon the age and nature of the child. Very young children should not be given details. You can tell them that you will give them more details when they are older but right now, "we are going to focus on remembering (name)." If the child is old enough to be told the manner of death, providing lots of details is not recommended to avoid putting vivid and bothersome vivid images in the child's mind.
4. Reassure the child that he/she did not cause the person to make that choice. Most survivors of suicide experience guilt. Because children are egocentric, they may think something they said, did, or didn't do caused it. They need reassurance that they are not the reason.
5. Do not overwhelm the child with too much information. Use brief explanations and be guided by the child's questions. Do not provide more information than needed.
6. Allow time for questions, both immediately and in the days and weeks that follow.
7. Ask other adults in the child's life to be cautious about what they say within hearing of the child. When adults are sharing secrets, children become very good at eavesdropping. Often children hear only small bits of information, leading to misinformation.
8. Talk openly about the death to lessen the stigma and judgment that often surrounds suicide. Children need to know they can talk about the death without judgment.
9. Remember the person who died and talk about them, just as you would if the death had occurred in some other way.
10. Share information about depression and mental illness. Children need to understand how mental health issues contributed to the suicide.

*Parents who make up stories, intending to tell the truth later run the risk of the child learning about the suicide on his own and/or making up details that may not be accurate. Additionally, changing the story later leaves children wondering what else they have been told that is not true. So, being truthful is the best way to handle it.*