

# Supporting a child or young person

## After a suicide

***A suicide death is uniquely difficult for everyone, especially for children and young people who have loved or known well the person who has died. They will experience grief in their own ways. When we can give our children and young people aroha and good support, it can help the whole family and whānau.***

### **Telling children and young people the news**

#### **The importance of telling them**

Telling your child or young person the sad news may not be easy. Instinctively we want to protect them. However, it's very important to talk with them honestly. Doing this right from the start protects the child from hearing the news insensitively from others, as secrets have a way of getting out and causing great harm. Giving the child truthful, age-appropriate information helps them to grieve in a healthy way and builds trust so you can be someone they can turn to the future.

#### **Are you the right person to tell them?**

It is best if a parent, primary caregiver, or a close and familiar relative shares the news. You may like to have another person there too when you tell them.

#### **Don't wait too long**

A delay in telling the child might mean they hear it from others, maybe in a harmful and confusing way. Children are observant and pick up on tension in adults around them. They will know something is wrong.

#### **Choose a safe, quiet place**

Find a private and comfortable place where you won't be interrupted. Turn your phone off. Perhaps have some of their favourite things nearby, especially for younger children.

#### **Prepare yourself first**

Take a few minutes to settle yourself. Take some slow, deep breaths. If you have another person with you, choose someone the children or young people also know and trust. If it would help, go over what you want to say by practicing it aloud. Once we have heard ourselves say the words, it can make it a little easier.

### **Some helpful things**

- Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in words they can understand. See the next page for some suggested words to explain what suicide means.
- The most important piece of information to share first is that the person has died. The child is likely to ask you how. Telling them that the person died by suicide, and explaining what suicide means, will help them to better understand what's happened.
- If you think they might have already heard the news, check what they know, in case they have been told things that are wrong or confusing for them.
- Give small pieces of information at a time. There will be a lot to take in all at once.
- You might need to repeat information. Shock makes it hard to take things in.
- Use non-judgemental language. Speak respectfully of the person who has died.
- The child may ask questions, perhaps very blunt or random ones. Answer as best you can. Allow their questions to guide the conversation.
- Let them know they can talk with you some more about what's happened whenever they need to.
- It's okay if you feel tearful. A child or young person can sense this is a serious, sad time. If you get very distressed, take a minute to ground yourself before continuing.
- The child will need reassurance from you. Use caring eye contact. They might need a hug or their hand held. Be kind and let them know they are safe and cared for.
- The child might ask unrelated questions or start to do an activity to distract themselves. This may seem puzzling but is normal. They are just working through the news in their own way.
- Wait for them to come back to you when they're ready to know more. In the meantime, be loving, kind, and caring.

## Tell the truth about the death

Being honest and open about a death is an important first step to help grieving children and young people. Explain simply that the person has died, and that they died by suicide. Let the child's questions identify what else they want to know. Don't describe graphic details about the death, such as about the method or location. This can be scary and harmful. Answer any questions honestly with short, matter of fact details, as best you can.

How children and young people understand death depends on their age and stage of development. Younger children do not usually understand that death is permanent. Gently explain that when someone dies their body stops working and it cannot be fixed. For any age, avoid euphemisms such as 'gone to sleep', 'gone away', or 'was lost'. These terms can confuse the child a lot and even be frightening. It's okay to say the person died.

Your family and whānau may also have faith or cultural beliefs about death and dying that you may want to explain to them. Keep these explanations simple.

Talking with the child about what's happened is likely to happen more than once. You may have conversations about it in the days, months or years ahead. As the child or young person grows up, they might have new questions to ask.



**Every time you talk about suicide, remind them of ways we can ask for help from others – and talk about who those people could be.**

## If finding the words is hard

The following words are some suggested ideas, but choose words that you feel are right to say and that suit your child or young person's age and stage.

For younger children, a simple sentence or two can be enough until they come to you with any questions.

*"I have some very sad news to tell you about X. X has died."*

*"They died by suicide. This means they did something to make their body stop working."*

or

*"I have some very sad news to tell you about X. X has died."*

*"They died by suicide. This means they did something to make themselves die."*

For older children and young people, a longer explanation will probably be needed.

*"I have some very sad news to tell you about X. X has died."*

*"They died by suicide. People who die by suicide are often extremely sad and hurting inside. They become very overwhelmed and so unwell in their minds that they can't think clearly. Sadly, they do something to make themselves die. This is what has happened to X."*

*"When someone dies by suicide, they choose to end their own life because, in their mind, at that time, living was too hard for them. Help was available, but they didn't know that or they didn't get help."*

Explain that it's important to always talk to someone we trust when we're feeling really bad inside. There are always people who can help us with whatever is causing us pain and hurt inside.

Let the child know that although we might have lots of questions, we just don't have the answers to all of them. Remind the child that *"we do know for certain that we loved/cared about X and that they loved/cared about us. X will always be very important to us for as long as we live."*

We can remind children and young people that everyone's life has a beginning and an ending but it's the life in between that counts the most.

*"How X died is not as important as how they lived. We can keep remembering the good things about them and the good times we had with them. We will always miss them and can always carry them in our hearts."*





### **The words we use when we talk about suicide**

There is still some negative stigma about suicide. Children and young people can pick up on it. The words we use when talking about suicide are important. Saying the person "committed suicide" suggests a crime was committed, when it wasn't. Saying the suicide was "successful" might suggest this was something to be proud of.

**Instead of  
'committed suicide'  
you could say they...**

**'died by suicide'  
'took their own life'  
'ended their own life'**

### **Questions that may be asked**

#### **Don't go into detail about how or the location of the suicide**

It can be traumatising and make suicide seem normal. If the child does know some details, talk about these briefly, giving short, key facts. Do your best to focus on how the person lived, rather than on how they died.

#### **Grieving children and young people often want to know more about why the person died**

Let them know that there is rarely one cause of a suicide and that suicide is complicated. Be ready with a simple but honest answer:

*"We don't know exactly why, but we think X got very overwhelmed and their thoughts got very confused. X wanted their terrible pain inside to stop and so they made themselves die. It will always be very sad. There are always people who can help when a person hurts this much."* (You may like to chat together about the people who can help.)

If the child is older, and the person who died had been unwell with depression, you may like to talk about depression together. Go to [www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz) for more information.

Remind the child that it isn't our fault that we get unwell, but it's important to do things that help us feel better and become well again, including asking others for some help when we need it. Talk together about things we can do when we're not feeling good inside.

#### **Don't give them more information than they ask for**

They can come to you with more questions later.

#### **If they're worried more suicides might happen**

Take this opportunity to talk about how important it is to be kind to others and to encourage a person to ask for help and support if they feel bad inside. Talk about why asking for help is a good thing to do when any of us need it and how to ask for it.

#### **If you don't know an answer to their questions**

You don't need to have all the answers, you can just say, *"What a good question, but I don't know. If I find out, I will let you know."*

## Telling their friends and others

It can be helpful to chat together about what they may, or may not, want to tell friends, their teacher or dean or others. People can be curious and even pushy. Explain they don't have to talk about it if they don't want to. Coming up with some things they'd feel okay to say and practising these together can build their confidence.

Talk about how to use social media safely, and how to respond (or not respond) to any mean comments or inappropriate questions.

## Common reactions to a suicide loss

Like adults, children or young people can experience all kinds of reactions after a suicide loss. Their brains have a lot to take in and process. Grief will often come in waves. They might be very upset and then suddenly act like nothing has happened. It can be a very up and down time – whatever their age or stage.

Let the child know that their reactions are normal, and everyone grieves in their own way. Be understanding and supportive, however they react. The child or young person might experience the following:

### Emotions

- shocked, confused, numb
- in denial – can't believe it's true, acting like it isn't
- rejected, abandoned – *Didn't they love me/us? Why did they leave me?*
- guilty – *Was it my fault? What could I have said or done to stop this?*
- sad and tearful – *They are not here anymore and never will be again*
- angry – at the person, others who they blame, or at their God, gods or the universe
- worried and anxious – *Will someone else I know die too? Who is going to look after me now?*
- shamed, embarrassed, whakamā – *What will others think?*
- lonely – *No one else understands what this is like, I feel very alone*
- relieved – if the person has been attempting or threatening suicide over a long time.

### Thoughts

- 'what ifs' – *If I or others had...*
- hard to focus on things, more easily distracted
- forgetful
- slower responses to questions or directions
- troubling memories, distressing imagined thoughts
- nightmares, flashbacks – reliving things they experienced.

## Physical

- feeling nauseous, stomach aches, headaches, body aches
- eating less or more
- sleeping less or more
- existing conditions get worse.

## Behaviour

- avoiding talking about it, or wanting to talk about it a lot
- choosing to hide the news from other people
- withdrawing from others, or spending more time with others/clingy
- being more fretful, irritable, acting out, more tantrums
- temporary developmental regression, such as using favourite comfort items again (blanket, toy), separation anxiety, a loss of confidence, bedwetting/soiling might start, speech confidence decreases.

## Spiritual

- searching for answers and meaning – *Why did they do this? What happened?*
- looking for the person who has died
- sensing the presence of the person who has died
- leaning on their culture and/or faith and beliefs
- having big questions about life and death.



“ We sat on the couch and talked about what to say if their friends asked questions. They said the words out loud and it helped a lot, because the questions did come. – Anonymous



## Supporting a child or young person who may have discovered or witnessed a suicide

If the child saw the suicide happen or saw or found the person's body, they will need loving support and understanding from caring adults around them. They may also need help from professionals with trauma support skills.

### First steps

- In a quiet place, gently ask them what happened. Keep it simple. They may not remember much at first and it may come back to them later. They might not want to talk because they're in shock or very frightened. Just be with them quietly instead.
- Let them know you understand it was scary for them, and they're safe.
- This is a very traumatic and overwhelming experience and it could be a very troubling time for them. They're likely to have some physical reactions, like feeling sick, experiencing headaches or stomach aches, shakiness, bedwetting, or reduced appetite. Difficult memories could keep coming back. They might find it hard to sleep and have bad dreams about what they saw.
- Arrange for the child to see a doctor, counsellor, or psychologist to help work through what they have experienced.

## Ways to provide support

To help your child or young person through their grief, let them share what they're thinking and feeling. Listen to their memories and stories of the person who died. Share your stories. Show them that it's okay to cry or laugh and that they are not alone on this journey.

### Reassure them...

- They are not alone – others are here to love and support them. Remind them who whose people are.
- This is not their fault. Nothing they said or did, or didn't say or do, caused this death. Repeat this more than once.
- They can talk about the person and what's happened with people they trust, whenever they want to. Talk to them about who these people might be.
- Everyone grieves a loss like this in different ways – it's okay to grieve in their own way. Their reactions are normal, even if they don't feel like they are.
- They won't always feel like they do now. Their grief will slowly become less strong, but it usually takes time and that's okay. Remind them they are grieving and feeling sad because they cared about the person very much. Even though difficult reminders and 'waves of grief' will come along, they will get through those times one step at a time.
- Remind them there are things we can do that can help us during this sad time. Talk about ways to look after ourselves. Eating healthy food, getting enough rest and sleep, keeping up our daily routines, school, and regular activities, talking to people we trust, asking for help if we need it, expressing our grief when we need to, spending time with people we like being with, and doing things we enjoy.



## Don't...

- Tell a child or young person how they should feel, or discourage them from expressing their grief, including strong emotions like anger.
- Avoid saying the name of the person who died. Use it respectfully.
- Talk negatively about the person who died. Don't criticise them.
- Provide details about the method of death. Research shows this can encourage others to think about doing the same thing.
- If they know details, encourage them to not share these with others.

## Do...

- Keep up their routines as much as possible – this brings some certainty.
- Give them regular attention – continue to reassure and encourage, listen to them.
- Understand they may have a variety of reactions for a while and be flexible.
- Understand they may communicate their feelings through behaviours rather than words – help them find some positive ways to express and release what is inside.
- Give them space to play, be creative, and distract themselves.
- Help them find ways to remember the person who died.
- Give them choices – this helps when everything else seems out of their control.
- Talk about who can give them help and support – normalise asking for help when they need it.
- Be in touch with their school to let them know what has happened. Check what support can be provided for them, if needed.
- Get extra help for them if needed.
- Help them know they won't always feel how they do now, and they'll be loved and cared about through this sad time.
- Use support for yourself – this can be hard.

## Be there for them as long as they need you

Just like adults, children and young people will be grieving *and* trying to make sense of what happened. This will take them the time it needs to take. Don't be surprised if, months or years later, a child or young person experiences fresh grief or struggles with new questions about the person's death. They might grieve in new ways as they reach various milestones. Be there for them as they grow. Build up a trusting relationship together, so they will come to you should they ever need support.

## Keeping them safe from suicide in the future

When a child or young person has had someone close to them die by suicide, they are at greater risk of having suicidal thoughts themselves – now or later in life. Being able to talk together about suicide and mental health honestly, making asking for help normal, building a trusting relationship, and supporting them through the good times and the hard times builds resilience. These all help to keep them safe.

The *Connecting Through Kōrero* guidebook and videos are New Zealand resources offering wise suggestions for parents and other caring adults wanting to keep their young person safe and informed about suicide.

## If you're worried about a child or young person

Don't hesitate to seek extra help. Contact a doctor, their teacher or senior school staff member, counsellor, psychologist, social worker, community or youth worker, or a local family support agency.

## Look after yourself

Take time to look after your own wellbeing – you also matter. Use the support around you.

Contact your doctor if you become unwell or find sleeping or your levels of stress and anxiety difficult. You can also call the free support phone line 1737 to speak to a trained counsellor, 24/7.

## Other helpful resources

*Conversations Matters – Telling a Child about suicide* (Australia) – Notes and podcasts.

<https://conversationsmatter.org.au/resources/telling-a-child-about-suicide/>

Children, Teens and Suicide Loss – Helpful suggestions about supporting a child or teen, such as getting back to school, funeral concerns, and keeping them safe from suicide themselves in the future. <https://aws-fetch.s3.amazonaws.com/flipbooks/childrenteenssuicideloss/index.html?page=1>

## Recommended Resources

### Trauma – How To Talk To Your Kids About It (Kidshealth NZ)

Some resources, in a range of languages, about how to talk to kids about trauma can be found on the NZ Kids Health website at [www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about](http://www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about)

### Skylight resources and support packs

Skylight makes available for purchase or loan a wide range of resources for all ages and stages, including the workbooks *Something Has Happened* (3–6 year olds) and *When Tough Stuff Happens* (7–12 year olds). They also offer free information packs tailored to your child's situation. Phone them 0800 299 100 or 04 939 6767 weekdays, or visit [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)

## Counselling Support Options

Organisations around the country offer counselling and support for children and young people. These links provide a list of the ways you can look for a child or youth counsellor in your area.

- [www.talkingworks.co.nz](http://www.talkingworks.co.nz) (Talking Works)
- NZ Association of Counsellors 04 471 0307 [www.nzac.org.nz](http://www.nzac.org.nz) – see search for a NZAC Counsellor
- NZ College of Clinical Psychologists 04 472 4088 [www.nzccp.co.nz](http://www.nzccp.co.nz) includes a directory and downloadable lists: Find a Clinical Psychologist
- NZ Psychological Society 04 473 4889 [www.psychology.org.nz](http://www.psychology.org.nz) includes a directory: Find a Psychologist
- [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/find-a-gp-or-counsellor](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/find-a-gp-or-counsellor) (NZ Mental Health Foundation)

Or call or text 1737 to talk to a trained counsellor about your concerns (24/7) and find out about services in your area.

Examples of national organisations you can contact include:

- Barnardos [www.barnardos.org.nz](http://www.barnardos.org.nz)  
0800 BARNARDOS (0800 227 627)
- Skylight [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)  
FREEPHONE: 0800 299 100
- Family Works, Provided by Presbyterian Support Services – [www.familyworks.org.nz](http://www.familyworks.org.nz)  
0508 TO HELP (0508 864 357)
- Tony's Place [www.tonysplace.org.nz](http://www.tonysplace.org.nz)  
Phone 022 451 1979 (weekdays 9am–5pm).

### In crisis right now?

- For urgent mental health support for your child or young person in your area, see <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/help> for a list of your local Te Whatu Ora services for children and young people
- If someone is in immediate physical danger, call 111.
- Or go to your nearest hospital emergency department as soon as possible with your child or young person.
- Phone your local Mental Health Crisis Team. Visit <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/help>

### Helplines for children and young people

- **What's Up** Kids and teenagers up to 18 years old can talk with professional counsellors. Available 1pm–11pm daily. (Barnardos) 0800 WHATS UP (0800 942 8787)
- **Youthline** Confidential youth help and information. For intermediate-aged kids and older. 0800 376 633 Free txt: 234 webchat at [www.youthline.co.nz](http://www.youthline.co.nz)

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of free information and resources. Visit [mentalhealth.org.nz](http://mentalhealth.org.nz) to find out more.

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