Supporting a child **bereaved by suicide**

Treetops Hospice

You are probably reading this leaflet because someone close to you has died by suicide and you may be deciding if, when and how to explain this to a child or young person in your care. We want to acknowledge that this is a daunting task, especially if you are grieving too. It can be a real challenge to work out exactly what to say, how much information to give and how to word it.

This leaflet is designed to supplement and be read in conjunction with the booklet 'Supporting a child when someone they love has died' and is part of the Little Gem series, 'Someone I love has died' and 'Someone significant has died – handling grief as a young person.' It is important to remember that every person and every family is different. There is no one 'right' way to talk about death by suicide. Let this guide be just that... a guide.

To tell or not to tell my child

Explaining any death can be difficult, but sudden death brings another layer of shock and disbelief to the bereavement and can leave both children and adults with heightened feelings of regret and missed opportunities.

The search for meaning and wanting to go back in time to change the course of events can feature heavily following a death by suicide. Thoughts such as 'if only....' and 'why didn't I...?' can be all-consuming and the senselessness of it all can feel overwhelming.

Taking all of this into consideration it is understandable that it might be tempting to say nothing and avoid a conversation all together. However, living in an environment of secrecy can be difficult and children tend to pick up on others' emotions and behaviours and know instinctively that something is wrong.

They can often fill the gaps in their knowledge with their imagination and come up with their own version of events, perhaps equally shocking but bearing little resemblance to reality. Half-heard conversations may also increase their anxiety and fear.

Additionally, they may believe they were somehow to blame for the death or feel that the subject is closed for discussion, and they should not bring it up, that the death is somehow unspeakable. In other words, the 'not knowing' can be almost as distressing as the 'knowing.'

You might think:

"I don't want to upset them"

"They won't be able to handle the truth"

"I can't find the words"

But... your child may be thinking:

"I've done something wrong"

"It must be so bad if no-one speaks about it, I'd better not ask what happened"

"It was my fault they died"

To consider:

There is a difference between telling a child their loved one has died by suicide and telling them the details of how their loved one ended their own life. Both pieces of information do not necessarily have to be given at the same time and the child or young person may prefer not to know the 'how' at first. Sometimes the initial information is enough for them to start with, they can ask for more details when they are ready.

Giving them a choice over knowing the 'how' and letting them know you will tell them when they feel ready can be a good place to start.

When to tell my child

Due to the enormity of the situation and the shock you are experiencing, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed by a desire to protect those around you. Whilst you might sense your child may be better off knowing and that telling them is inevitable it is easy to put this off to an unknown point in the future when you think the conversation will be easier. This runs the risk of them finding out via other means that you have little control over.

A sudden death by nature often attracts more media attention than an expected death and so if a child is not told by those close to them, there is a chance that they will find out by other means, perhaps another child in the playground, someone in the local community or even by searching for details themselves online. Receiving this news in a supportive environment is hard enough but finding out 'accidentally' adds an unnecessary layer of distress.

If a child or young person hasn't been told how the person died at the time, and they find out some years later they can feel very resentful, leaving them with a deep sense of betrayal and lack of trust. They may have to reassess their relationships with those that they trusted and potentially grieve all over again in a different way. In addition, if they are not given an opportunity to acknowledge and/or express strong feelings at the time, they may really struggle to come to terms with the death and loss which may pose a risk to their mental and emotional wellbeing in the intervening years.

To consider:

This is going to be a difficult conversation whenever you have it, so consider telling your child or young person as soon as you possibly can. This will ensure you are the one to tell them and allows you to fully support them with the news.

If possible, telling a child before they return to school allows them to be more prepared for others' comments and reactions and can give them time to prepare a version of events that they are comfortable with sharing.

If you have more than one child and you feel it is better to tell them separately, try and do this at a similar time. When deciding on the level of detail to share with children of different age groups, be mindful of the burden of asking an older child to keep certain facts to themselves.

How to tell my child

You may find it helpful to rehearse what you might say with a trusted friend or family member first and think about the kind of questions your child may ask.

- Choose a quiet place without too many interruptions. Pick a time of day when your child is not too tired.

- Prepare your child by saying you have some very sad news to tell them, news which might be very difficult for them to understand.

- Begin by explaining that their loved one has died, use factual, simple language according to your child's age or/and stage of development.

- Check out what your child knows already about death and dying, particularly about how people die. This can give you a starting point from which to develop your conversation further.

- Explain to your child as simply as you can that their loved one ended their own life. There may be some context or relevant circumstances that you can draw on to help you explain, in which case sticking to the basic facts of, for example, their loved one's sadness, low mood or illness is probably most helpful, particularly if the child has some awareness of this already.

- If the death has come as a complete shock to the adults in the family, it is better to be honest at this stage and say you don't know why their loved one ended their own life. This allows your child time to take in what's happened by focusing on the known facts. It also allows you time to gather your own thoughts and prepare for further conversation.

- Reassure your child that you can talk again when you both feel ready.

Next steps

- At some point, it may seem appropriate to offer further chunks of information depending on your child's individual need and developmental stage, however it is important not to overwhelm your child and this may be a conversation that takes places over a longer period of time rather than happen immediately.

- Before offering more detail, explain to your child that they cannot un-know the details once they are told, so check whether they feel ready for more at this point in time and allow them to go away and think about it. Reassure your child that you will tell them more when they feel ready.

- Be honest with your child if you don't want to tell them any more at this stage, perhaps because you feel they are too young. Knowing their loved one ended their own life but no more, is a starting point and more helpful than avoiding the conversation altogether.

- If your child asks a question that you don't know how to answer, be honest. Acknowledge the importance of the question and tell them that you need some time to think about how best to answer it and you will get back to them. Follow through on this, it gives your child the message that they can bring up the topic. They are then more likely to return to discuss things further as their need for information grows.

- Over time, introduce the term 'suicide' into your child's vocabulary and understanding. Others will use this, so it is important that they come to understand what it means. Phrases such as 'made themselves die', 'ended their own life' can be developed into 'took their own life' and 'died by suicide' as your child's understanding grows. Older children may already be familiar with the term suicide and it may be sufficient to check their understanding.

To consider:

Each death and the way we grieve is unique so how you explain it will be tailored to your situation. You know them best, be guided by your individual child / children. Making sense of suicide can be hard for all concerned but as with any type of death, helping your child to develop a narrative about the death of their loved one will help them to accept and process it fully. Remember, you don't have to have all the answers but acknowledging the importance of your child's questions will help them. It is ok to say if you are confused by what's happened too.

Encouraging children to talk about their difficult feelings and emotions helps them to name and understand them. This is part of them then being able to process these difficult emotions. They then have a template for dealing with future challenges. Having these tough conversations gives young people the message that no topic is off the table for discussion, which develops their coping strategies and creates a stronger bond with you.

Further support

This leaflet is written to support our two primary publications in the Little Gem series:

- Supporting a child when someone they love has died / Someone I love has died
- Someone significant has died – handling grief as a young person

Our other specialist leaflets include:

- Talking about and understanding death
- Supporting a child bereaved by murder
- Building resilience following a bereavement
- Telling a child a friend has died
- Funerals and cremations
- Viewing a body with a child

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