

Talking to your Children in the Aftermath of a Peer's Death by Suicide

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General considerations:

- Counseling a child in the aftermath of a peer's death by suicide is grief counseling: be honest, calm, acknowledge and normalize wide range of reactions.
- Withholding the truth from children interferes with the grieving process. Children can work through the trauma best when they are told the truth and have their feelings acknowledged and accepted as they are. Answer questions in way that fit the child's developmental stage and concept of death. Emphasize that the death has nothing to do with anything the child did and does not mean that the deceased didn't love them.
- It is important to balance being truthful and honest without violating the privacy of the suicide victim and his/her family and to take care not to glorify their actions.
- It is important to have the facts of the incident, be alert to speculation and erroneous information that may be circulating and assertively, yet kindly, redirect the child toward productive, healthy conversation.
- Children may experience the same range and intensity of feelings that many adults do. These may include shock, numbness, denial, sadness, anger, anxiety, shame and guilt. (See the chart at the end of the booklet.) Children may express their feelings by crying, withdrawing, laughing, or expressing anger at you or others.
- Reinforce protective factors:
 - Protective factors identified by the World Health Organization are the following: stable families, positive connections at school, good connections with other youth, religious involvement, lack of access to lethal weapons, access to mental health care and awareness of crisis hotline resources
- Return to normal routines when possible. Encourage him or her to continue seeing friends and engaging in social and recreational activities.
- Make sure that a trusted adult is always available.
- Get professional help if he or she behaves in a way that concerns you, especially if the behavior lasts for an extended period of time.
- The suicide of someone in the community or media reports about suicide may influence vulnerable young people to think about suicide. Adults should be sensitive to young people and familiar with the risk factors and warning signs of suicide and also know what to do if they are concerned about a student.

LISTEN to what they say and how they act.

"I am so sorry this happened to you"

- Let your child know you are willing to listen and talk about their peer's death. Don't be afraid to talk to the child about suicide, you will not be "putting ideas into their heads".
- Listen for risk factors or clues that indicate the child is having a difficult time coping and make appropriate referrals if necessary.

- Caution: Do not investigate or probe deeply for details as you may trigger trauma reminders.

PROTECT *by maintaining structure, stability and consistency.*

- Protect child from bullying or teasing by classmates or school staff
- Offer to intervene with friends that might be insensitive
- With your child's permission, talk to teachers/staff to build a support system; to protect the student from bullying in the classroom; to observe the student for symptoms of depression or risk for suicide
- Build on your child's strengths. Find ways to help them use what they have learned in the past to help them deal with death.
- Normalize the wide range of emotional reactions.

CONNECT *through interaction, activities &resources.*

- Help to surround the child with a "Circle of Care" by fostering connectedness with adults, family and other peers.
- Support the child to memorialize their friend by attending the funeral, reaching out to their friend's family, or donating to a suicide prevention effort in the community.
- Encourage activities with friends.
- Check in with your child daily at first. Tread lightly with teens!
- Do not make promises or false assurances.

MODEL&TEACH *about normal changes that can occur when traumatized or grieving.*

"You are not to blame."

"It is not your fault."

- Consider the developmental age of your child when discussing suicide and depression.
- No one thing and no one person is ever to blame for someone's choice to die by suicide. Suicide is very complex and can't be simplified.
- Suicide is very often the result of a serious mental illness like depression, or alcohol and substance abuse.
- Stress to school staff that students are watching how the adults respond and it can influence how your child behaves.
- One goal of crisis counseling is to help restore your child's adaptive functioning. Help your child to problem solve to get through each day successfully.
- Help your child to set small "doable" goals.
- Make sure children know it's OK to feel happy as well as sad.
- Impress on your child that with time and support, people feel better. If your child does not feel better with time, they should be encouraged and taught to seek assistance from a parent/guardian or a teacher they know and trust.
- Children have a lot of questions when someone in their world dies. When a peer dies by suicide, those questions can be even harder. When children don't have answers to their questions, they tend to come up with their own, which can be incorrect and scary!

Provide answers to the most difficult questions in age appropriate terms and keep in mind, children can often understand more than you might think.

- Some questions might include:
 - Why did he/she die by suicide?
 - What is suicide?
 - Did I do something to make this happen? Is it my fault?
 - What method did they use?
 - Why didn't God stop them?
 - Could I have prevented it?
 - Will I die by suicide too?
 - What should I say now about my Mom/Dad?
 - Is it ok to be angry?
 - Isn't something or someone to blame?
 - How can I cope now?
 - What if I do if I am worried about my other parent, sibling, relative or friend?
 - How can I make a difference in suicide prevention?

Suggested reading:

After a Suicide: Answering Questions and Assistings

Dr. Scott Poland, Nova Southeastern University

Richard Lieberman, Loyola Marymount University

Talking to your kids about suicide

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide

<http://www.sptsusa.org/parents/talking-to-your-kid-about-suicide/>

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<http://afsp.org/files/Surviving/talkingtochildrenaboutsuiicide.pdf>

Child Survivors of Suicide by Rebecca Parkin with Karen Duimme-Maxim

<http://www.friendsforsurvival.org/children-with-grief>

Psychological First Aid (PFA) LAUSD/School Mental Health

http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,1090035&_dad=ptl&_schema=PTL_EP