

Supporting your child after someone dies by suicide



Advice for parents and carers after
the suicide of a parent/guardian,
sibling, or other significant person

Childhood bereavement charity Winston's Wish estimates that 25 children lose a parent to suicide every day in the UK – that's more than 9,000 every year.

Supporting your children after a suicide

When someone dies by suicide, it can have a devastating impact on a family. It can be hard to come to terms with the fact that somebody has ended their own life, especially when they leave behind children.

The complicated grief arising from a suicide affects people of all ages, including children and young people who can often blame themselves and experience feelings of shame, guilt, anger, and abandonment. This can lead to low self-esteem, poor mental health, and risk-taking behaviour, so it's important that they receive timely support, particularly after the suicide of a parent or primary caregiver.

This leaflet is designed to help you support your children and access specialist services and resources for families impacted by suicide.

'Children need reassurance that they are loved and that nothing they did caused the death. They may worry that something else bad is going to happen and need reassurance that the world is good, safe, and controllable.'

Dr Diana Sands, Director of Bereaved by Suicide Centre for Intense Grief

Myth busting: children, young people and suicide bereavement

Suicide can be a very difficult subject to talk about, especially when broaching the topic with a child or young person after a parent or caregiver has taken their own life. This fear is often grounded in a series of myths around suicide and perceived risks associated with talking about it, so let's shine a light on some of them:

MYTH

If I talk to my child about suicide, it might prompt them to harm themselves.

FACT

Talking about suicide provides the opportunity for communication. Fears shared are more likely to diminish. There is no evidence to suggest that talking to young people about suicide increases their risk of self-harm or suicide. Giving a child space to share how they feel about someone close to them ending their own life lets them express their complicated grief in a safe environment.

MYTH

She is too young; I'll tell her when she's old enough to understand.

FACT

It is recommended to be honest with children about a suicide as soon as possible, even if they are very young when it might feel like you are protecting them by withholding the truth. By using age-appropriate language and answering their questions truthfully when they arise, surviving caregivers can maintain a relationship of trust, help children navigate their complicated grief and access specialist support. Remember it's never too late to tell the truth even if you didn't at the time.

MYTH

It's better that a professional tells my child about the suicide death.

FACT

It is better that a child or young person is told by someone they love and trust, such as their surviving parent. This can be done with the support of professionals and advice from specialist childhood bereavement charities, but it is recommended that they are told by a person they are close to in a familiar environment.

MYTH

My child would prefer the suicide not to be mentioned.

FACT

Children pick up on how adults behave after a traumatic incident. If something is not spoken about, they tend to follow suit and it can become a taboo within a family. Try to model behaviour that makes them feel comfortable to ask questions and share their feelings by speaking openly about the suicide and the person who died. It can be helpful to seek support from a counsellor if you find this difficult.

MYTH

Suicide is no different to other sorts of bereavement. It's best to just treat it like any other sort of death.

FACT

Bereavement by suicide is distinct from other types of death due to complex feelings such as guilt, shame, anger, and abandonment, and the potential impact on self-worth. Due to this complicated grief and subsequent long-term impact on mental wellbeing, it is important that children bereaved by suicide and their families have access to specialist support.

MYTH

Children aren't affected by grief like adults. It's much harder for the adults left behind. Kids just bounce back.

FACT

Children express their grief in different ways at different times. Young children often jump in and out of their grief – sometimes referred to as 'puddle jumping'. This is a natural way to protect themselves from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings. A lack of tears or outward grief doesn't mean that they will not be adversely impacted in the long-term.

MYTH

Funerals aren't the place for children, especially after a suicide.

FACT

Funerals, memorial services, and ash scattering ceremonies provide adults and children with the opportunity to honour and remember a loved one. It also provides a final chance to say goodbye to the person's physical body. If children are excluded, they miss the opportunity to hear that they were loved and to process their own grief. Explain what will happen so there are no surprises and allocate somebody to accompany them if they want to leave at any point.

Here are ten tips for supporting your child after suicide bereavement

1. Suicide grief is different, seek specialist support

Suicide can leave children feeling a wide range of emotions from guilt and relief to shame and abandonment. Remember that you are not alone, there are lots of people who want to help you navigate this difficult time, especially when it comes to providing your children with the support they need. Contact the pastoral staff at your child's school or college for support such as the ELSA. There is also a network of Loss Champions working across the city who will provide support and signposting to additional help. National childhood bereavement charities Winston's Wish and Childhood Bereavement UK provide specialist support (see page 9).

2. Be aware that children express grief differently to adults

If your child jumps in and out of grief after a suicide, crying one moment and then happily playing with friends the next, rest assured that this is perfectly normal. It's a natural strategy to avoid being overwhelmed by powerful emotions, and it does not mean that they are not affected by the loss. Also, children of different ages understand the concept of death differently. Younger children don't understand it as a permanent state so their understanding will develop as they grow up so be ready to answer their questions as they arise.

3. Ask open questions and be accepting of all emotions

Try to listen to what your child has to say by asking open questions and making no assumptions. Rather than 'you must be so sad that daddy has died' opt for 'how are you feeling?' Remember they will look to you for what it is okay to talk about, so if you never speak the person's name or use the word suicide, they will learn not to either. It is natural for a child not to want to cause you more distress, so make sure you tell them that it's okay to feel however they feel.

4. Be honest and talk openly about suicide and mental health

It's important to be truthful as it enables them to ask questions, promotes trust and opens the door to specialist support. Don't be afraid to talk about suicide, mental health, and depression as it allows young people to express their feelings and ask questions in a safe environment. They will take a lead from you so create a safe space for them to talk about their feelings. Reassure them that they are loved, it is not their fault and that everyone is there to provide support.

5. Provide outlets for grieving and age-appropriate resources

Provide opportunities for your child to express grief including through non-verbal means such as art, music, or physical activity as well as a quiet space for 'time out' whenever needed. Bear in mind that it can be easier to have a difficult conversation with a child whilst doing a craft activity or walking in nature. A range of age-appropriate resources are available to support children and their families after suicide including several that can be downloaded free of charge (see page 10).

6. Avoiding describing suicide as a conscious choice

Referring to the suicide of a parent/guardian as a 'choice' can reinforce a child's feeling of rejection and abandonment as it implies it was a rational choice to die and leave them behind.

The 'choice' to die by suicide is often not a choice in our normal understanding of the word. For someone in a suicidal state, it can feel like the only way to stop the unbearable pain of living, so avoid saying things like 'your dad chose to end his own life'.

7. Use non-judgmental, straightforward language and avoid euphemisms

It can confuse a child if you say, 'he's in a better place now' or 'she's gone to sleep'. To help children understand that death is irreversible, especially younger ones, it is better to say the person 'has died' or that the person's 'body has stopped working'.

Avoid saying that the person 'committed' suicide. Research supports the use of to 'die by' suicide or that the person has 'taken or ended their own life' as the verb 'commit' is often used in relation to crimes and sins, and its use is thought to reinforce stigma around suicide.

What you say to your child can stay with them for a lifetime, so even if you feel angry or let down, talk about the person who died with compassion as someone they love deeply.

8. Encourage children to return to their familiar routine

Many children crave normality after a suicide bereavement. It is not unusual for them to want to return to school and their familiar routine as soon as possible. After a traumatic experience a young person can often find comfort in their regular routine at school or college and the 'normality' it provides away from the home. This can include taking part in sports clubs, being around trusted adults, and having fun with friends.

9. Provide opportunities for your child to remember the person who died

Everyone processes grief differently and that includes children, it can be especially difficult with the complicated grief after a suicide. Funerals and memorials provide an opportunity for adults and children to honour and remember the person who has died, and to share precious memories. Children can be encouraged to write a poem or pick the person's favourite flowers to put on their coffin to honour their memory. The person's birthday can be marked with a visit to their favourite place, or by making a piece of art to remember them.

10. Self-care is paramount, by looking after yourself you can look after your child

After a suicide, everybody is in shock, and it can be hard to even carry out basic everyday tasks. It is vital that you take care of yourself and access the support you need, both practically and emotionally, so that you can provide your children with the support they need. Amparo offers support for anyone affected by suicide in Hampshire (see page 9).

What should I say?

- 'It's so understandable that you feel that way.'
- 'This is not your fault, your mum/dad loved you very much and we are all here for you.'
- 'Have you been able to talk to anyone else about how you are feeling about what has happened? Did you find that helpful?'
- 'You might feel like you're the only one who is going through this but there are lots of other children/young people who are going through the same thing.'
- 'There are organisations that help children/young people after someone dies by suicide. Would you like me to organise for you to talk through things with someone there?'

What shouldn't I say?

- Focus on actively listening to how the child or young person feels now rather than saying things like: 'It will get better' or 'you need to be strong now'.
- Avoid euphemisms like 'he's in a better place now' or 'she's gone to sleep'.
- Don't make assumptions such as: 'You must miss mummy so much' or 'you must be so sad that your dad has died'.
- Avoid comments that encourage becoming an adult too soon such as: 'You're going to have to look after me now' or 'you're the man of the house now.'
- Avoid judging the person who died with comments such as 'he took the easy way out' or 'she was so selfish to do that to us'.
- Avoid saying the person 'committed' suicide as the verb 'commit' is most-commonly used in relation to crimes and sins. It's recommended to say the person 'died by suicide' or 'took their own life'.

Organisations providing support to families after suicide bereavement

Amparo offers practical and emotional support for anyone affected by suicide in Portsmouth, Southampton, the Isle of Wight and across Hampshire. Support can be provided one-to-one, to family groups, groups of colleagues and peers, or whatever is preferred by you. The service can be delivered in your home or wherever you are most comfortable. Amparo's service is completely confidential and can provide both short-term and longer-term support.

- Call: 0330 088 9255
- Email: amparo.service@listening-ear.co.uk
- Website: www.amparo.org.uk/refer/

Child Bereavement UK helps children, young people up to age 25, parents and families to rebuild their lives after the devastation of bereavement. The charity provides free, specialist bereavement support to anyone affected by the death of someone important to them, including by suicide, offering support sessions for individuals; groups for families; and groups for young people; as well as support in parenting a bereaved child.

- Freephone helpline: 0800 02 888 40
- Email: helpline@childbereavementuk.org
- Live chat via website: www.childbereavementuk.org

Winston's Wish is a national charity providing support for children and young people up to the age of 25 following the death of someone close to them, including those bereaved by suicide. A wide range of practical support and guidance is available to individuals, families and professionals via a freephone helpline, online support, live chat, email, individual and group support, publications and training.

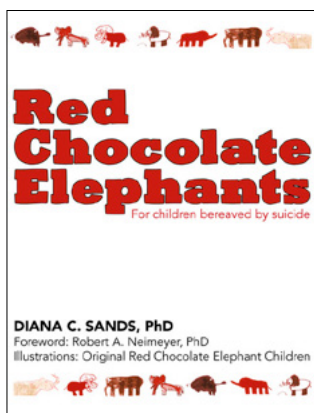
- Freephone helpline: 08088 020 021
- Email: ask@winstonswish.org
- Live chat via website: www.winstonswish.org

Resources for children and young people bereaved by suicide

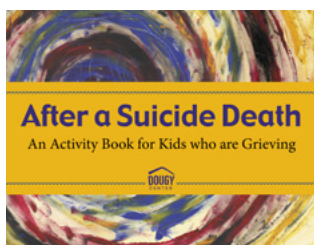


Beyond the Rough Rock, published by Winston's Wish, the childhood bereavement charity, is a useful resource for those supporting children and young people after suicide bereavement.

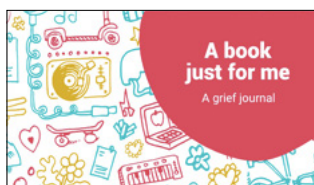
Available via WH Smith, Blackwell's, and via <https://shop.winstonswish.org>



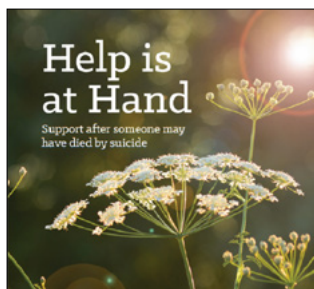
Red Chocolate Elephants is a book and accompanying USB compiled by Australian suicide bereavement expert Dr Diana Sands for primary-aged children after suicide loss. It is intended to be read with an adult. Available in the UK via Child Bereavement UK: www.childbereavementuk.org/shop



Dougy Center in the USA is a world-leading organisation supporting children after bereavement, and has some specialist resources related to suicide. A range of books and DVDs can be ordered online, including their ***After a Suicide Death: An Activity Book for Grieving Kids***, and a number of free resources and podcasts are available for download via: www.dougy.org



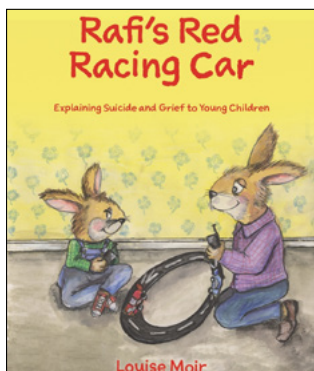
A book just for me – a grief journal for children under 12 (with accompanying notes for parents) and ***My grief journal – for grieving teens*** are free, downloadable resources for children and teens bereaved by suicide, produced by StandBy Support After Suicide in Australia. These books, along with various other online resources to support children and young people after suicide, can be downloaded via: www.standbysupport.com.au/resources



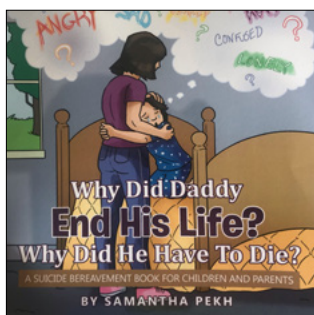
Help is at Hand and **Finding the Words** are two free booklets published by Support After Suicide, providing useful information and advice for families bereaved through suicide or other unexplained death. They are also helpful for those supporting them, and are available via their website at www.supportaftersuicide.org.uk



Luna's Red Hat by Emmi Smid (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) is an illustrated storybook to help young children cope with loss and suicide. It is suitable for children aged 6+ and is written for anyone working with or caring for children bereaved by suicide, including bereavement counsellors, social workers and school staff, as well as parents, carers, and other family members. Available via Amazon.



Rafi's Red Racing Car by Louise Moir (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) is an illustrated book for children aged 3 to 8 to help them come to terms with the loss of a family member to suicide. The book includes a guide for adults on how to help a grieving child to heal after suicide bereavement. Available via Blackwell's.

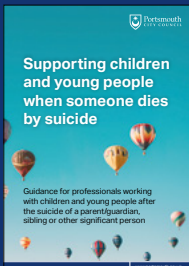


Why did daddy end his life? Why did he have to die? by Samantha Pekh (Balboa Press) is a suicide bereavement book for children and parents. Written by a Canadian psychologist for children aged 5 to 12, this illustrated story provides a fictional character for children to relate to. The story guides them through the difficult emotions they may feel but often find difficult to express. The supplementary guide for parents and caregivers answers common questions and provides specific examples of how to talk to children about suicide. Available via Amazon.



About the author

The content in this leaflet was produced for Portsmouth City Council's Public Health Department by Churchill Fellow Anna Wardley, who specialises in improving the support for children and young people after suicide bereavement. Motivated by her own lived experience of losing her father to suicide when she was nine, her Churchill Fellowship research on the support for children and young people after a parent dies by suicide has taken her to three continents. She now works in partnership with a range of organisations to share best practice from around the world to improve the way suicide bereaved children and young people are supported in the UK.



In addition to this leaflet for parents/carers, Anna Wardley has produced a guide for professionals supporting children and young people after somebody dies by suicide on behalf of Portsmouth City Council. It contains practical advice, guidance on language, age-appropriate resources and information about organisations providing specialist support. It is available via www.portsmoutheducationpartnership.co.uk/suicidebereavement

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