

Supporting children and young people when someone dies by suicide

Guidance for professionals working
with children and young people after
the suicide of a parent/guardian,
sibling or other significant person

How many children and young people lose a parent to suicide each year in the UK?

- The simple answer is: we don't know as nobody counts them.
- In 2018, 3,596 men and women in the UK aged between 20 and 49 took their own lives (ONS, 2019). How many of these were parents? Again, we don't know.
- Child 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.

Why is it important to support children and young people after suicide bereavement?

- Increased risk-taking behaviour including substance misuse and self-harm¹
- Twice as likely to be hospitalised due to depression²
- Three times higher suicide rate than the wider population³

A note of hope...

'Children are surprisingly resilient. A loving, supporting environment and careful attention to any emerging psychiatric symptoms can offset even such a major stressor as a parent's suicide.'

Holly C. Wilcox, Johns Hopkins University, USA



What the experts say about childhood suicide bereavement

"Children bereaved by parental suicide are not only left trying to understand why a parent took his or her own life, but also have to cope with the impact on the surviving caregiver, who may not be able to provide the support they need." Mitchell & Terhorst, 2017.

"Research supports providing an honest, age-appropriate explanation about the death, rather than ambiguous half-truths. When children are given incorrect information it's like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces, and this can add to their confusion and distress." Dr Diana Sands, Director of the Bereaved by Suicide Centre for Intense Grief, Sydney.

"The ways people talk about suicide are often not helpful to children. For example, when they talk about it being a rational choice. I don't use language such as saying it was the person's 'choice' to take his or her own life, as this can be very unhelpful for children left behind." Donna Schuurman, EdD, FT, Senior Director of Advocacy & Training Executive Director Emeritus, Dougy Center, Portland, Oregon.

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 a young person 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. In the case of a young person bereaved by suicide, they are already acutely aware that their parent has ended their own life so discussing that will allow them to express their feelings in a safe environment.

MYTH

She is too young to understand. I will tell her when she is old enough to understand.

FACT

It is recommended to be honest with children about a death by suicide as soon as possible, even when they are very young. By using age-appropriate language and answering their questions truthfully when they arise, surviving caregivers can maintain a relationship of trust and help children navigate their complicated grief.

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, but it is recommended that they are told by a person they are close to in a familiar environment.

MYTH

Children are not affected by grief in the same way as adults. My son was playing with his toys and laughing five minutes after I told him about his mum's suicide.

FACT

Children and adults express their grief in different ways at different times. Young children, unlike adults who stay with their grief, often jump in and out of their grief – this is sometimes referred to as 'puddle jumping'. Initially they may be upset about the loss, but then appear to be fine for a period of time, before becoming upset again, and so on. This can create confusion and they will need time and understanding to help them to process their loss. This is a natural way to protect themselves from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings, and complicated grief related to suicide can still have a significant long-term impact.

MYTH

If a child or young person has lost someone to suicide, they would prefer it not to be mentioned.

FACT

By not acknowledging how a loved one has died we can perpetuate the stigma surrounding suicide. Children and young people look to adults for signals of what it is okay to talk about, and if they sense something is not to be spoken of, they will mirror this which will hinder their ability to deal with their complicated grief.

MYTH

Suicide is like any other type of bereavement so it's better not to talk about it and to treat them just the same as those affected by other sorts of bereavement.

FACT

Bereavement by suicide is distinct from other types of death, especially for children and young people due to the complex feelings of guilt, shame, 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 receive specialist support.

MYTH

It's better that my child doesn't go to the funeral as it's not an appropriate place for children.

FACT

Funerals, memorial services and ash scattering ceremonies provide both 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 out on an opportunity to process their own grief and could harbour long term resentment as a result. It is recommended that children are given the choice to take part, so that they can decide to what extent they would like to be involved. They might want to write a poem to be read out or place some flowers on the coffin. Ensure that a trusted person explains in advance what will happen on the day so there are no surprises and allocate somebody to accompany the child if they want to leave the ceremony at any point.

MYTH

It's gory to take a child or young person to see a dead body. It'll give them nightmares.

FACT

Seeing the body of a loved one can help both adults and children come to terms with the loss, especially in the case of a sudden death such as a suicide. It's a personal choice whether you decide to view the person's body prior to a burial or cremation, but there is no reason that children or young people should not be given the option to be involved. Set time aside to explain what they will see, to answer any questions in advance so that they are prepared and let them know they can leave the room at any time if they are not comfortable.

Guidance for supporting children and young people after suicide bereavement

The suicide or attempted suicide of a parent/carers, sibling or other significant person can have a devastating impact on the life of a young person. Such a loss poses significant risks to their own mental health, the potential for increased risk-taking behaviour such as substance misuse and self-harm, and an increased risk of suicide. With timely support these risks can be mitigated. Schools and colleges can play an important role in providing that support, and those with existing relationships of trust are well placed to listen, provide reassurance, and help the young person access specialist support.

Here are ten tips for professionals supporting children and young people after suicide bereavement

1. Suicide grief is different, signpost to specialist support

Bereavement by suicide is distinct from other types of death, especially for young people due to the complex feelings of guilt, shame, abandonment, and the potential impact on self-worth when a primary caregiver dies by suicide. This can lead to complicated grief resulting in a long-term impact on mental wellbeing.

Focus on active listening, supporting the bereaved family and monitoring the young person for changes in behaviour. Signpost those impacted by suicide bereavement to specialist support. You can do this via the national helplines operated by Winston's Wish or Child Bereavement UK. (See *Resources and sources of support section in this leaflet*).

2. Ask open questions and give space to listen

Practice active listening, ask open questions and make no assumptions about how the young person feels. Rather than saying: 'You must be so sad that your mum has died', opt for: 'how are you feeling?' Find out if the young person has someone to talk to about how they are feeling. You could ask: 'Can you talk to your dad about how you are feeling? Is there anybody else you can talk to?'

3. Be accepting of all emotions

Suicide can result in a wide range of emotions in children and young people including:

- ambivalence towards the person who has died
- relief that the person died after suffering in lead-up
- guilt stemming from a sense of being responsible
- shame for feeling relief
- anger towards the person who has died and/or surviving relatives
- regret at things left unsaid and not having opportunity to say goodbye

4. Support the whole family, not only the young person

Find out what the young person already knows and what they understand about the death, taking into account their developmental level. It's important to have empathy for everyone involved including the person who died. Find out what support is already in place and refer to support organisations such as Winston's Wish or Child Bereavement UK and publications such as *Help is at Hand* published by Support After Suicide and age-appropriate resources for the young person. (See *Resources and sources of support* section in this leaflet).

5. Promote truthfulness

Encourage the family to be honest about the deceased's cause of death and share with them the risks associated with non-disclosure of a suicide:

- deepens stigma and reinforces isolation
- eliminates opportunity for children to ask questions
- no access to postvention services and specialist support
- other survivors of suicide cannot offer kinship
- breaks down trust with surviving family members
- damage to relationships when truth inevitably emerges

6. Talk openly about suicide and mental health

Don't be afraid to talk about suicide, mental health and depression. 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.

Be compassionate and provide reassurance. Tell the young person that s/he is loved, it is not his/her fault and that everyone is there to provide support.

7. Be aware that young people express grief differently to adults

Children and young people, unlike adults who stay with their grief, often jump in and out of their grief – this is sometimes referred to as 'puddle jumping'. This is a natural way to protect themselves from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings.

8. Provide outlets for grieving and age-appropriate resources

Provide opportunities to express grief including through non-verbal means (art, music, etc) as well as a quiet space for 'time out' whenever required. A range of age-appropriate resources including books and DVDs are available to support children and their carers after suicide including several free online resources. (*See Resources and sources of support section in this leaflet*).

Have a plan in place for supporting children after suicide and make sure everyone is aware of the role they will take.

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

For example, 'he took too many tablets on purpose and they stopped his heart working' or 'she died because she put something tight round her neck as she didn't want to live anymore'.

Avoid using expressions like 'he took the easy way out' or 'she was so selfish to do that to you'. Remember that you are criticising someone who the young person loves deeply.

It can confuse a child if you say, 'he's in a better place now' or 'she's gone away' or 'she's gone to sleep'. To help younger children understand that death is irreversible 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 'die by' suicide or that the person has 'taken or ended his/her 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.

10. Avoid presenting suicide as a choice

Referring to the suicide of a parent/guardian as a 'choice' can reinforce a young person's feelings of rejection and abandonment, as it implies it was a rational choice to die and leave their children 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.

Finally...

One of the most important roles for schools and colleges is to provide the child or young person bereaved by suicide with a familiar routine and opportunities for normality. 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, having fun with friends and feeling loved.



What should I say?

- 'It's so understandable that you feel that way.'
- 'That must have been so difficult for you to tell me. I'm glad you did.'
- 'Have you been able to talk to anyone about it? Did you find that helpful?'
- 'You might feel like you're the only one who has been through this but there are other children/young people who are going through the same thing.'
- 'There are organisations that help children/young people going through this. Would you like me to organise for you/your child 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 your 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 your mum 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 you'.

Organisations providing support for children after suicide bereavement

Winston's Wish

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. In addition to supporting bereaved children and their families, the charity also offers training and guidance to those working with children and young people.

How to access support from Winston's Wish:

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

Child Bereavement UK

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. Specialist bereavement training and workshops on supporting children and young people bereaved by suicide are also offered.

How to access support from Child Bereavement UK:

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

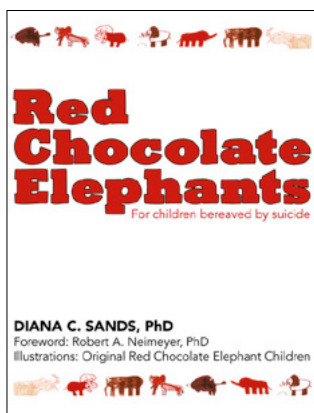
Resources for children and young people bereaved by suicide



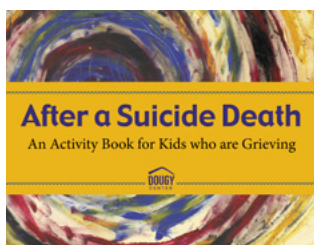
Beyond the Rough Rock, published by Winston's Wish, the childhood bereavement charity, is a useful resource for those supporting children and young people after suicide bereavement.

Available via WH Smith, Blackwell's, and via

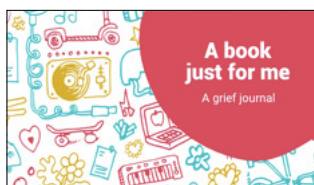
<https://shop.winstonswish.org>



Red Chocolate Elephants is a book and accompanying DVD 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

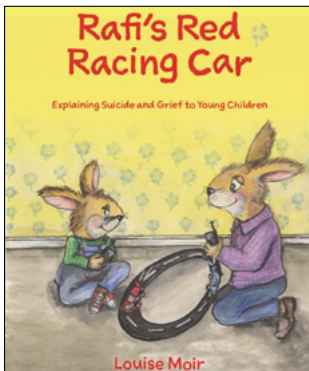


A book just for me – a grief journal for children under 12 (with accompanying notes for parents) and ***My grief journal – for grieving teens*** are free, downloadable resources for children and teens bereaved by suicide, produced by StandBy Support After Suicide in Australia. These books, along with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

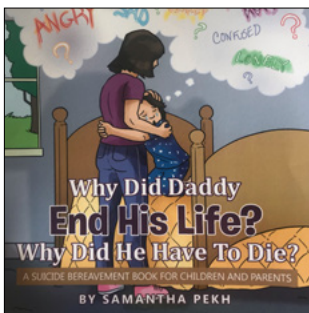
Help is at Hand and **Finding the Words** are two free booklets published by Support After Suicide, providing useful information and advice for families bereaved through suicide or other unexplained death. They are also helpful for those supporting them, and are available via their website at www.supportaftersuicide.org.uk



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.

References

1. Andriessen K, Krysinska K, Rickwood D, Pirkis J, "It Changes Your Orbit": The Impact of Suicide and Traumatic Death on Adolescents as Experienced by Adolescents and Parents, *International Journal of Environmental and Public Health* (December 2020)
2. Holly C. Wilcox, Satoko J. Kuramoto, Paul Lichtenstein, Niklas Långström, David A. Brent, Bo Runeson. Psychiatric Morbidity, Violent Crime, and Suicide Among Children and Adolescents Exposed to Parental Death. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2010)
3. *Ibid*

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.



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