



STARTING THE **CONVERSATION** WHEN...

SOMEONE DIES FROM SUICIDE

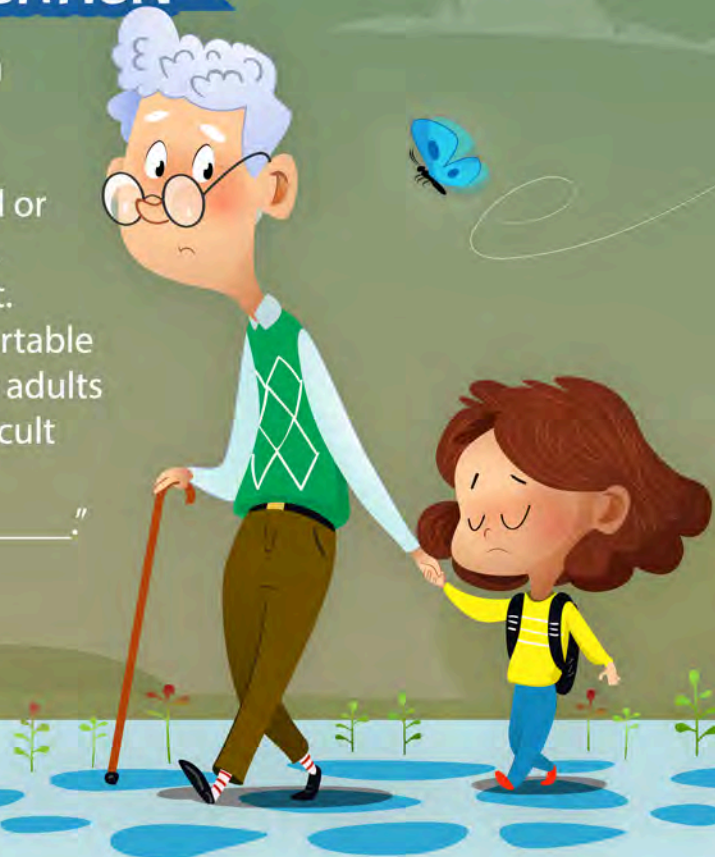
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It's natural to want to protect children from difficult news, or to assume that they're too young to know or understand. While you never need to feel pressured to talk before you're ready, it is okay to tell children of any age truthful information about the cause of death. It's better for the truth to come from a trusted adult than from social media or from someone at school or in the community. Telling a child directly helps build a foundation of trust and safety with their adults while giving them an opportunity to ask questions. If you're struggling with how or if to have this conversation with your child, please reach out to discuss your child and family's specific needs, or for support in preparing for this difficult conversation.

The information below is intended to guide you with suggestions on ways to approach this conversation.

PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION

- Prepare yourself so you can have the conversation in a gentle and honest manner.
- While you may never feel completely ready, you can feel more prepared if you are not tired, hungry, rushed or emotionally exhausted. Consider your well-being first.
- Share the news in a comfortable, familiar environment.
- Have other adults present who the children are comfortable with, if possible, to support both them and you. These adults can assist in delivering the news if it becomes too difficult for you.
- Start by saying, "I have some very sad news about _____." or "We need to talk about _____."



BY AGE GROUP

PRESCHOOL

“They died. ‘Died’ means their body stopped working.”

“They made their body stop working.”

“They can’t come back.”



ELEMENTARY

“They died from suicide (or *They died of suicide* or *They died by suicide*).

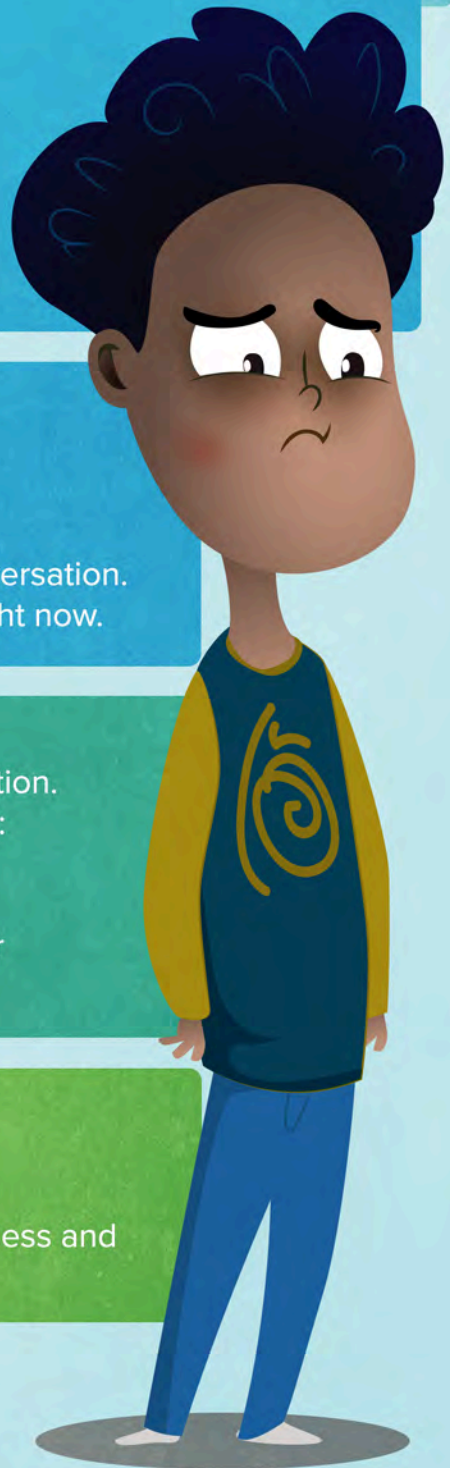
Do you know what that word means?”

“They died by suicide. That means they made their body stop working.”

“They died from suicide. Suicide means they caused their own death.”

TEEN

“They died from (*of, by*) suicide.” Avoid using words such as committed (*this implies crime*) or completed (*implies successful outcome*).



HOW MUCH DO I TELL THEM?

- Use honest, direct language.
- Start by sharing that they died and the cause of death.
- Pause and ask the child if they have any questions.
- You don’t need to give them more information during this first conversation. This may be all the information your child needs or can process right now.

WHAT IF THEY ASK HOW?

- If they’re asking, it’s a sign that they’re ready to hear more information.
- Answer their question directly using factual language. For example:
 - “*With a gun.*”
 - “*They took more pills than their body could handle.*”
- You don’t need to give more information than they ask for—let their questions guide the conversation.

WHAT IF THEY ASK WHY?

- “I wish I knew why.”
- “It’s hard to understand why.”
- “They had an illness in their brain that made them feel a lot of sadness and made it hard for them to think clearly or ask for help.”

KEEP IN MIND

- It's okay to pause and think about your answers before you respond. You can always return to a question when you feel more prepared to answer.
FOR EXAMPLE: "That's a really good question. I'd like to think about that before I answer."
- It's never too late to give a child truthful information.
FOR EXAMPLE: "When your mom died, I wasn't sure how to talk to you about it or how much I should tell you. Remember how I told you that your mother's body stopped working? I want to tell you more about that now."
- As children reach new developmental stages, their understanding will evolve and they will likely have additional questions or revisit questions you have already answered.

SUPPORTING THE CHILDREN

- Reassure the children that nothing they did or said caused this to happen.
- Provide opportunities for play, physical activity, and alone time as needed.
- Maintain routines and structure as much as possible.
- Answer questions truthfully, while addressing fears and validating feelings.
- Check in with your children periodically and ask them if they have questions about the death or about their person. Assure them you will get through this together.
- It's okay to talk about the person who died. That lets children know that you're open to them talking about the person with you.
- Engage school personnel (teachers, school counselors) to support the child and make a plan for when the child is having a hard time at school.



RESOURCES

For more information on suicide and on supporting grieving children, please visit the following resources:

- Highmark Caring Place – highmarkcaringplace.com
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – AFSP.org
- Alliance of Hope for Suicide Survivors – allianceofhope.org
- National Alliance for Children's Grief – nacg.org
- The Dougy Center – dougy.org
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline – suicidepreventionlifeline.org or dial **988**



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CARING PLACE

finding hope in grief

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Pittsburgh, PA 15222
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CAMP HILL

1800 Center Street
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866.613.4673

ERIE

510 Cranberry St., Bldg. 2
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WARRENDALE

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