

After a Suicide Death: Ten Tips for Helping Children & Teens*

1. Tell the truth

It's important to be honest with children and teens. They don't necessarily need to know every single fact about a death, but they do need to hear truthful answers and information. Start with a short explanation of what has happened, and let their questions guide how much detail you provide.

2. Expect and allow for different emotions and feelings

Feelings and grief reactions are influenced by many factors, including the age, personality and developmental level of the child. You may see a broad spectrum of emotions in children and teens, including anger, frustration, guilt, numbness, shock, sadness, relief, confusion, shame, fear, loneliness and embarrassment.

3. Talk openly about suicide

Our society continues to stigmatize suicide, as well as the families of those left behind. It is often an uncomfortable and shocking topic that can leave people unsure of what to say. In light of this challenge, it is critical that kids have safe places where they can talk openly about the death without judgement and awkwardness.

4. Hold a memorial service

No matter how difficult or painful the deceased person's life or death may have been, grieving children and teens deserve the opportunity to say goodbye and to honor the person's life.

5. Talk about and remember the person who died

Don't be afraid to talk about and remember the person who died. Remembering is part of grieving.

6. Share information about depression and mental illness

Suicide is not usually a random act — it occurs in a

context. Although no one knows what causes suicide, most people who die of suicide have experienced some form of depression or mental illness. It helps children to know that the person who died was in fact suffering from a kind of illness in his or her thinking.

7. Be prepared for fears

After a suicide death, children have many fears. During these times, it is helpful for trusted adults to stay connected and listen to their questions and concerns. Offer reassurance without making promises such as, "This will never happen again."

8. Inform the child's school about the death

Children spend a lot of time in school and a death affects not only family life but school life. That is why it's important to inform a child's teacher, counselor, coaches, and any adult support person in the school setting about the death. Talk with your child about what they would like in terms of sharing the news with their classmates and others in the school.

9. Provide outlets for grieving: Play, physical activity, art...

Play is a natural outlet of expression for children. While adults tend to talk out (or hold in) their grief, children are more likely to express it through play. This is one way you can validate their experiences and help them regain a sense of balance and control.

10. Respect differences in grieving styles.

Children's grieving styles — even in the same family — can be very different. Some kids want to talk about the death, while others want to be left alone. Recognizing and respecting that each person grieves in his or her own way is essential.

*Excerpts from the "After a Suicide Death: Ten Tips for Helping Children & Teens" brochure. Full version available for purchase at www.dougy.org or by calling 503.775.5683.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Our Mission

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 55,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.