

# Explaining Suicide to Children

## Introduction to Parents

Suicide is a tough subject to talk about, especially if you have recently experienced a loss. This pamphlet is here to help guide you and your family to begin these conversations and the grieving process. First, know that you do not need to tell children everything at once; it is okay to do this in stages and at your child's pace. Using the trusted people around you is okay to help you communicate information to your child(ren). It may be helpful for you to be present to provide comfort and support while hearing what is said.

### Getting started

There is no perfect way to say and do things. As a parent, what is most important is finding the best way to address this topic that helps you, your child, and your family. Take the time to determine what this looks like for your family.

People will begin asking questions that you need more time before answering. This will happen to your children and family members as well. It may be helpful to discuss what everyone feels comfortable sharing up front. It is okay to show your emotions of sadness, anger, etc., with your children. It allows children to know they can show feelings too. If you feel your emotions may be too much for your child to bear, it may be good to get some additional support for you.

Your child in the present moment will understand this through their developmental age conception, yet as they grow older, they will have more clarity on this topic and may grieve differently.

### General tips

As parents, we focus a lot of our time on our children. You need to take care of yourself. Grief is hard, and everyone needs time. This includes you.

You will struggle with what happened and try to understand the why behind it; meanwhile, children will share similar feelings. You can talk about the positive and negative moments and the guilty feelings that accompany those tough thoughts.

- Reassure your child that this person loved them and that the person's actions were not a reflection of how important they were to them.
- Keep reminding your child that they did not cause this to happen.
- Children often do not have the skills to process or verbalize feelings for complex situations such as this. Look for changes (good and bad) in your child's behavior. This is key to how much they are struggling.
- When children feel frustrated or angry, they often take these emotions out on the people they feel closest to. They know these people will be there no matter what. Be patient, as they may direct their anger out at you.

## Under 3

**Language:** Keep it simple. For example, using words like “they died” is helpful at this age. These are hard words to say, but they are important because it helps decrease confusion with other phrases.

**Keep in mind:**

- Children do not understand the permanency of death, so they may continue to look for their loved one.
- Children of this age take on the emotions of their primary caregiver.
- It is okay to seek support no matter how you are coping.

**How to Help:**

- Maintain the child’s routine as much as possible.
- Be patient if the child begins to regress to an earlier stage of development (ex., potty trained, may have accidents).

## Ages 3–6

**Language:** Children are looking for concrete phrases. They will need to hear words like, “their body stopped working; they don’t breathe anymore.” Children may ask how or why, so you may need to prepare how you want to address the suicide. Some families want to explain suicide early, and some choose to wait.

**Keep in mind:**

- Peers become more important at this age, so they may share this information with their friends before sharing it with adults or parents.
- Children may only ask some of their questions; check in with them.

**How to Help:**

- Allow for playtime, so they have the opportunity to express their feelings.
- Try to maintain the child’s routine as much as possible.
- Be patient as a child may regress to an earlier stage of development (ex., separation anxiety)

## Ages 7–11

**Language:** Children understand more information. You can use words like, “Their brain was sick in a way that made them feel hopeless, and they caused their own death. This type of death is called a suicide.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Peers become more important at this age, so they may share this information with their friends before sharing it with adults or parents.
- Children only ask some of all their questions; check in with them.

**How to Help:**

- Identify other adults within their trusted areas to support your child.
- Reach out for professional help if your child has a significant behavior change.

## Ages 12–17

**Language:** Adolescents are fully able to understand the causes of death. You can use words like, “They caused their own death or died of suicide.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Teens will also process through play (ex., writing in journals, hanging out with friends, and playing music).
- Teens need honesty and for their parents to follow their lead.

**How to Help:**

- If you see a significant change in behavior or mood, please seek professional help.
- Encourage your teen to maintain a routine as much as possible.
- Continue to be present and available for your child.

# Explaining Suicide Attempts to Children

## Introduction to Parents

Your family is navigating a difficult topic. Suicide is not an easy topic to talk about, especially when you are worried about a loved one. This pamphlet is here to help guide you as you speak with your other children in your home and provide you with the most immediate information you will need. You are not alone. Suicide is more common than most people realize.

Everyone in the family will experience a variety of feelings. There is no right or wrong way to feel. This process takes time. Please make sure the other children know you are there for them. Additionally, find time to check in with them regularly. They need your presence too.

### Getting started

You may be thinking, what do I tell my children? The information on the next page may help guide you. Here are some general tips as you navigate these conversations:

- Find a quiet place with few distractions.
- Children often process through age-appropriate play. It is okay to provide them with physical and creative outlets to process.
- If your child has another close adult, you should include them so they have someone to talk to when you are helping other family members.
- Children do best if they receive information in an age-appropriate way.
- Provide the information they need to know; they don't need to know everything all at once. Answer the questions they've asked, and feel free to table the rest.

### Helpful information

The days ahead may feel overwhelming. Your family member may have a hospital stay and a safety plan as they come home. This is a tool to help them navigate their feelings while keeping them safe.

Prepare the children if anything at home is going to change. For example, "we are moving the medication to a different location."

- Ensure the child does not feel responsible for maintaining the safety plan.
- Reach out to the school so they know the child may be struggling. School counselors can be excellent resources for support.

Children often have questions that can catch us off guard. If you struggle to navigate these questions, ask for help from a mental health professional.

- They may ask, "Why did they want to die?" You can say, "I don't know," and then focus the conversation on how their loved one is getting help.
- Often, faith-based questions come up. It is okay to share your faith, but avoid shaming the person who attempted suicide.

## Under 3

**Language:** Keep it simple. Focus on the change that the child will notice. For example, you could say, “---is in the hospital” or “Their body is hurt, and they are in the hospital.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Children will not understand the complexities of this situation but will sense the emotions of their caretakers.
- It is okay to seek support no matter how you’re coping.

**How to Help:**

- Maintain your child’s routine as much as possible.
- Be patient if your child begins to regress to an earlier stage of development (ex: potty trained, may have accidents).

## Ages 3–6

**Language:** Children are looking for concrete phrases. They will need to hear words like, “— was feeling sad and hurt themselves” or “— hurt their body.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Children may not sit for a long conversation; it may occur over time.
- Don’t be alarmed if a child immediately leaves the conversation to play or do a typical activity.

**How to Help:**

- Allow play; this helps them express their feelings.
- Maintain the child’s routine as much as possible.
- Be patient if your child begins to regress to an earlier stage of development (ex: separation anxiety).

## Ages 7–11

**Language:** Children understand more at this age. Some phrases suggested, “Their brain was sick in a way that made them feel hopeless, and they attempted to hurt themselves,” or “at this time, we are still trying to understand those feelings and why they decided to hurt themselves.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Peers become very important at their age, so they may share this information with their friends before sharing it with adults or parents.
- Children can often think they caused or did something to make this happen.

**How to Help:**

- Your child may need help determining how to address this situation with their peers or how to talk to their loved ones when they see them again.
- Check in with them often.

## Ages 12–17

**Language:** Adolescents are fully able to understand suicide. You can use words like “They attempted suicide” or “at this time, we are still trying to understand those feelings and why they decided to attempt suicide.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Adolescents’ feelings may change from day to day.
- Allow space to feel whatever emotions come up, as long as they are not physically hurting themselves or others.
- Adolescents may need help setting boundaries or sharing about their loved one with others (ex., what they want to say, how to redirect questions).

**How to Help:**

- If you see a significant change in behavior or mood, please seek professional help.
- It may be helpful for the school to understand so they can provide some support and flexibility during this time.
- Continue to be present and available for your child.

Be in a neutral, safe setting

Use age appropriate language

Deliver information in bite size pieces

Be prepared for mixed emotions

Give physical and creative outlets