When a Friend of Your Child's Dies by Suicide

A Guide for Parents

Step One: Dealing with Your Feelings

When your child's life is touched by the suicide of a peer or a friend, you may find yourself experiencing a lot of different things at the same time. Initially, you will most likely be stunned by the death. Suicide is, in fact, a rare occurrence that is difficult for most of us to understand. When a young person makes this devastating choice, our personal sense of shock and confusion can be overwhelming. The questions of "how and why could this happen?" are often topics of neighborhood gossip and speculation. This is when it's so important to remember that suicide is a complex act that is always related to a variety of causes. It is likely that we may never know all the reasons for any suicide. This gap in accurate and complete information is often filled with half-facts and speculation. Especially after the suicide of a young person, we tend to feel if we can search out the causes, we can protect ourselves and our children from a similar fate. And while it's true that understanding risk factors and warning signs of suicide can be very helpful, we don't want to make judgments or assumptions about this particular death. So don't give in to random conversation about the reasons for the death. The most important thing any of us can say—and it is a lot!—is that this young person was not thinking clearly and made a terrible choice that ended his or her life.

If you knew the deceased personally, you may feel a jumble of unsettling emotions yourself. Give yourself some time to let the news settle. Expect shock to mix with sadness and helplessness for quite some time. If your personal values define suicide as morally wrong, you may struggle to find a balance between making a judgment about what the person did and remaining nonjudgmental about the person who did it ("What he did was so stupid" rather than "He was so stupid"). This difference may seem subtle, but it's important because it can contribute to the social stigma and shame family members may experience. Ultimately, the fact that this youngster completed suicide will be less central to your emotions than the fact that he or she is dead and will be missed by you.

It really is critical for you to take time to deal with your own feelings before you approach your child. Remember the directives from air travel about the use of oxygen masks: first you must put on your own mask before you help anyone else with theirs.

Step Two: Helping Your Kids

This initial response of shock and disbelief may be followed quickly by concern for your own children. If your child or children had a personal relationship with the deceased through friendship or involvement in team sports, church groups, or community activities, your child's grief should be your first priority. As you probably know already, grief in childhood looks different from the way it looks in adulthood. Children tend to experience intense

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feelings, like those that accompany a meaningful loss, in short bursts. Feelings normally pass quickly, which is why it's important to seize those "teachable moments" when the door to conversation about the death may be open. Here are steps to follow for that conversation:

- Start by expressing your own sadness and confusion about the death, and then ask your child to share his or her reactions.
- Validate whatever you hear. ("I can appreciate your sadness/confusion/anger/lack of understanding.")
- Be prepared for the classic "I don't know" response and validate that, too! ("I understand that when something like this happens it can be hard to know how you feel.")
- If you've been hearing rumors about the death, chances are your child has heard them, too. ("There's a lot of information floating around about what happened. Have you heard any of the rumors?") Explain that although some of the rumors may be true, they are only part of the story and we have to be careful not to make judgments based on limited information.
- Emphasize that the most important piece of the story is the fact that the deceased felt so terrible or was thinking so unclearly that he or she did not realize the consequences of what he or she was doing. This is especially important to talk about if alcohol or drugs are implicated in the death.
- Remind your child, without preaching or lecturing, about the effects of drugs on impulse control and judgment.

Because children normally imitate or copy the behavior of peers, you may want to underscore the dangerous consequences of the deceased's behavior. Sometimes children are intrigued by the circumstances of a suicide completion or attempt, so it's essential to state *emphatically* that there can be a fine line between dangerous behavior and deadly behavior—and their friend's death reflects this. If they hear any of their friends talking about copying the behavior of the deceased, they need to tell an adult immediately!

This leads into the final part of the conversation: a discussion about help-seeking. Emphasize that nothing in life is ever so terrible or devastating that suicide is the way to handle it. Ask your child to whom he or she would turn for help with a serious problem. Hopefully, your name will be on the top of the list, but don't be upset if it isn't. Depending on your child's age, his or her allegiance may have shifted to peers. Agree that friends are a great resource but that when a problem is so big that suicide is being considered as its solution, it's essential to get help from an adult, too. Ask what adults your child views as helpful, especially with difficult problems. If the list is short or nonexistent, make some suggestions. Good choices can include other adult family members; school staff like teachers, counselors, coaches, or the school nurse; clergy or youth ministers; parents or older siblings of friends; or even neighbors. The identity of the person is less important than the fact that your child recognizes the importance of sharing problems with a trusted adult.

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