

SUPPORT PACK INFORMATION

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER SUICIDE

Support for Parents and Carers



When suicide occurs, most people describe feeling a range of emotions from shock and disbelief to anger and extreme sadness. Many parents and carers feel unsure of how young people will cope and what they should be told. Children and young people express their feelings differently to adults. They grieve in ‘bits and pieces’, and don’t maintain the same emotional intensity for long periods like adults can. They need time to make sense of the loss, and the changes, and may appear at times as though they are unaffected and everything is okay. Children may seem too young to understand what has happened. Many parents describe feeling anxious about talking to their children about suicide. It is important to explain things in a way that young people understand and that the parent/carer is most comfortable with. Often children and young people say that death and suicide is confusing, so it is important to check what they have understood.

Children are very sensitive to change and pick up that something is happening that they don’t know about. They may make up fantasy stories to fill up the gaps in their knowledge about death, or may overhear or be told stories by their friends or neighbours. An important part of the grief process is knowing how the person died. Not knowing this information can interfere with a child’s grieving and long-term adjustment. Young people have also said that it is important to be reassured that they are not responsible for the person’s suicide.

HOW DO I EXPLAIN SUICIDE?

It may be helpful to explain death as when the body stops working. It is not helpful to say that a person has gone away or is sleeping. This can be confusing and sometimes frightening for a child. One way of defining suicide is to describe it as “when someone makes their body stop working”. Parents may be concerned that a young person may copy suicidal behaviour, particularly if they appear sad or worried. Encouraging young people to talk about their feelings or worries can be helpful. It is also important to help young people develop their own ideas about positive ways to solve problems. There is no right or wrong way to grieve but if there are worries about how a young person is coping, it is useful to speak to a grief counsellor health professional.

THE VIEWING AND FUNERAL

The viewing and the funeral are important opportunities to remember the person who has died, express grief, and to say good-bye. Young people can be involved in many ways by drawing pictures, writing letters or poems, playing a special song, or taking a special item to the funeral to place on the coffin. There is no right age for taking a child to funerals – some people feel it’s important for young people of all ages to be included. Parents or carers ultimately need to make the decision that they feel is best for the young person.

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Listed below are some ways of supporting children or young people to attend:

- Before the viewing and/or funeral it is important to let young people know what they may expect: where things will be, who will be there, and what people might do. This might include alerting them to any grieving rituals used by loved ones from a cultural background other than their own.
- Counsellors can also support young people and answer questions about the viewing or funeral. It can be useful to have a separate viewing for parents, young people and immediate family.
- Have a support person for the young person at the viewing or funeral, someone whom they are close to and feel safe with.
- Children may be noisy at funerals. It may be useful to tell them it's a bit like being in the library when you have to behave quietly. It may help to take a colouring book or storybook. It may be necessary to have a support person take the young person outside for a break.
- Other families have suggested these ideas to help support young people. Make a record of the funeral, such as via photographs, audiotapes or videotaping. This is particularly useful when young people are very young and ask questions as they get older. You might also like to make hand and foot prints of the person who died.

The wake or family gathering after the funeral can also be confusing for children and young people. It may be useful to have a room where they can play or watch a video. It is generally helpful to let teachers and school principals know what has happened and make arrangements for the young person to see the guidance officer. Teachers can also watch out for any changes in behaviour or signs of not coping. It is important to keep talking to children and young people about how they are feeling, even six months and more after the event. Young people may also have periods when they are distressed. It is an important part of the grief process. Hugs and reassurance are good supports for a young person. Most parents and carers describe feeling confused by the range of feelings they and their children experience, and found it helpful to talk to someone about how they were coping.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Lifeline

Freecall 13 11 14

24hr Crisis Counselling Line

Parentline (Qld Only)

Freecall 1300 301 300

10 – 12pm (7 days)

If a child or young person experiences persistent behavioural or mood changes, a more specialised assessment or intervention may be required, such as by referral to a Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS). For local clinics, look under Health in the White Pages.

Books & Other Resources

Supporting Children after Suicide.....Information for parents and other caregivers.
Kerrie Noonan & Alana Douglas 2001. Ph (02) 9816-0452 or www.nalag.org.au

Coping With Grief Mal and Di McKissock. ABC Bookstores

It was Suicide! The questions it raises for those left behind Lifeline Ph 131114

Websites

ReachOut! www.reachout.asn.au

Grieflink www.grieflink.asn.au

Kids Help Line www.kidshelp.com.au

This information has been compiled by StandBy Response Service from information contained in the booklet *Supporting Children after Suicide Information for Parents and Other Caregivers*. Written by Kerrie Noonan / Alana Douglas and the Brisbane Royal Children's Hospital and Health Service District Child & Youth Mental Health Service.