

**How to  
help  
children  
and  
young  
people  
bereaved  
by  
suicide.**

**Believe in  
children**



**Barnardo's**  
Northern Ireland



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# Introduction

**When someone takes their life, family members can feel numb and confused about how best to tell their children and support them.**

**This booklet aims to provide practical help.**

**The most common question asked is “Why?”**

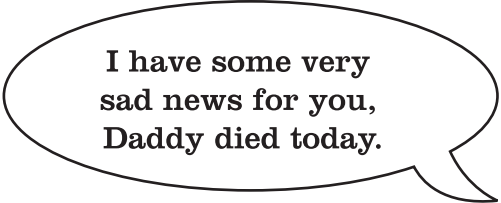
**In most cases, this question is never answered.**

**Children are resilient and with the right support, information and care, they can cope with bereavement through suicide.**

## Key messages

- **A trusted adult should tell a child about the death of a loved one and be available to talk and listen to them on an ongoing basis.**
- **Be honest with the child, it is better they hear the truth from someone who loves them.**
- **Keep the information simple, factual and appropriate to their age and understanding. You can add more information as they get older.**
- **Children will not take everything in at once. Repeat the story of what happened over and over again.**
- **Involve children and young people in the funeral arrangements. Give them choices without overwhelming them.**

## Finding the right words...



**I have some very sad news for you, Daddy died today.**

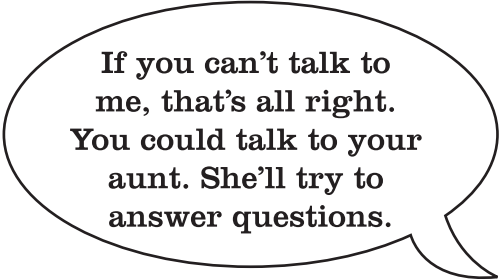
A child or young person should be told the facts by someone with whom they have a positive relationship.

**YOU CAN SAY THIS!**

In all families, it is difficult for a child to talk to a very close family member, such as a parent, because they are aware of the pain that everyone is feeling.

It helps to tell the child to talk to a particular family member or friend to whom they are particularly close.

You may want to involve another adult for support and agree beforehand what you want your child to know.



**If you can't talk to me, that's all right. You could talk to your aunt. She'll try to answer questions.**

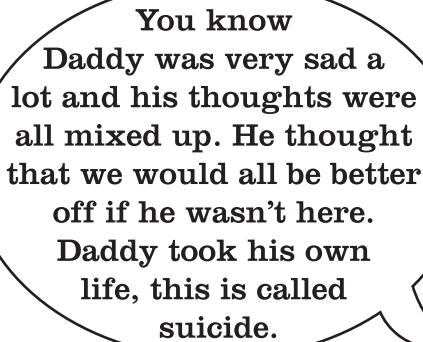
**YOU CAN SAY THIS!**

## Finding the right words...

Sometimes children imagine the person died because of something they said or did, or imagine something much worse than the truth.

Children do not need to hear everything all at once, but in stages and in words that they can understand.

Remember to keep with the child's pace and questioning, don't give them more information than they want, they will come back and ask more questions when they are ready.



**You know  
Daddy was very sad a  
lot and his thoughts were  
all mixed up. He thought  
that we would all be better  
off if he wasn't here.  
Daddy took his own  
life, this is called  
suicide.**

**YOU  
CAN SAY  
THIS!**

## Finding the right words...

**Suicide is when a person is so very sad that they choose to make their body stop working.**

**YOU  
CAN SAY  
THIS!**

**Your sister hurt herself and this caused her to die.**

Sometimes this may be all the child/young person needs to know at the time.

**YOU  
CAN SAY  
THIS!**

It is necessary to tell the child /young person that the person died from suicide, so that they hear the truth in a gentle way from someone who loves them.

In some situations, children can find out from their peers on the street or in school and this can cause immense distress and pain.

**“I found out that everyone in my class knew my daddy had hanged himself. Nobody told me the truth. He was my daddy. Why couldn’t I be trusted with the truth?”**

**Remember children are resilient**

## Finding the right words...

If the suicide was impulsive this also needs to be explained:-

**Your brother and his girlfriend had a fight and he was very angry and upset.**

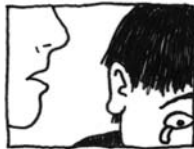
**YOU CAN SAY THIS!**

**He decided to take his own life, if he'd waited until the next day he would've felt differently. He had been drinking and perhaps this affected the way he was thinking.**

**YOU CAN SAY THIS!**

Children and young people need repeated reassurance that the death was not their fault.

Adults may know some of the reasons that lead to suicide and it can be helpful to the child/young person if these are shared.





## Finding the right words...

**“When my daddy took an overdose and died five years ago I thought it was because of my behaviour.”**



**“I now know that he was depressed and it was not my fault. It would have really helped if someone had told me that at the start.”**

**Suicide is never a way to answer a problem and it is important to remind children there are other ways to get help with problems.**

# At the Time of a Death

Keep to a child's routine as much as possible.

Keep life simple, focus on a child's basic needs for food, warmth, safety and shelter.

Children will benefit from having only a few safe adults that they are familiar with around them.

They need to remain in the same environment for a while, usually home, to help rebuild their sense of security.

It is normal for children to not want to separate from a remaining parent or family members, to lose their appetite and have bad dreams and worry that other loved ones may die.

These are normal reactions to loss.

Following a death there is a period of adjustment, usually about six months to a year. However, if a child's daily functioning continues to be impaired, for example if they refuse to eat, have persistent bad dreams or flashbacks, or will not return to school it is important to seek advice, if in doubt ask for help – contact Barnardo's helpline, telephone  
**028 9064 5899 / 028 9069 4000**

## At the Time of a Death

When explaining a death, use the words 'death' or 'dead' rather than phrases such as 'gone to a better place', 'we have lost her', as these phrases can lead to misunderstanding and distress.

Stephen (7) who could not sleep since his brother took his own life, said:

**'My nanny said that my brother had gone to sleep for a very long time. Why can't he just wake up?'**

Young children need to be told repeatedly that when someone dies they can never come back- parents need to explain that the bodily functions cease- the dead person does not eat, sleep, breathe or feel any pain.



Ian (6) said **'Will my daddy be there when we go on holiday?'**

It is important that children know the cause of death- this should be explained in accordance with the child's understanding and stage of development.

## At the Time of a Death

**If children are not given a clear explanation for the death, they may blame themselves or imagine something more terrible.**

Children need to know that death is universal. It happens to everyone at some time, but at different ages, under different circumstances. If children are asking questions, answer them as simply and honestly as possible.


Children will need to have this information repeated over and over again.

Children and young people grieve in a more sporadic way than adults do. They switch between being very sad one moment, and excited and happy another.

This can be very distressing and upsetting to adults and can mislead them into thinking the child is coping better than he/she really is.

Children's feelings of loss and pain are similar to adults, and can be experienced at different stages in their lives.

## What Can Help the Child

- Being involved and informed-children benefit from being involved with the family's grieving process and being informed of any changes that affect them, for example moving house.
- 
- Telling their story – Children need opportunity and permission to tell what happened in their words and attach their feelings to it.
  - Some people view suicide and mental illness very negatively and may make very cruel comments and jokes. It is important to prepare your child for this and to encourage them to always tell an adult when this happens and help them think about how they could respond, for example “My brother was sick and very sad...”
  - Make sure children know they won't always feel so sad; they need to have a sense of hope and understand they will always be loved and taken care of.
  - Encourage the child to talk and ask questions or, if they find

**Remember children are resilient**

## What Can Help the Child

this difficult, to write and/or draw pictures.

- It is important to take time as a family to do things together that make you feel happy e.g. play a game, go see a film, visit a favourite place etc.
- Children need hugs and kisses, lots of warm affection and reassurance.
- A child needs to know that the person that died loved them very much.
- Often adults seek out support for children first, such as bereavement counselling but children often come to terms with their loss if and when the adults in their lives also obtain support and help for themselves.
- Talking to a professional outside of the family can help, there are also support groups for families bereaved by suicide.
- Many children also benefit from meeting other children who have been bereaved by suicide – often through group work. They feel accepted and not so alone.

# The Funeral

It is helpful for children to be involved in the funeral. This is the time to say 'goodbye'; children need to be given this opportunity.

If family and friends are viewing the body, children should be given the choice of seeing the body. The children need careful preparation for this task, for example, a clear description of the coffin, the room, the body, and what to expect.



They should be accompanied by a trusted adult who can support and answer any questions. Some children may need permission to touch the body; others may not want to. They may want to put a letter, drawing or favourite toy in the coffin.

Children should be given the choice of attending the funeral, again with a trusted adult who can answer any questions and be supportive.

# The Funeral

In some situations, this may be an aunt, uncle or someone who is not in the immediate family who can meet the child's needs whilst the funeral is in progress.

Again, children should be given the option of direct involvement in the funeral service, if appropriate. However, it is important that they are not burdened with responsibilities.



## Where is the person now?

Each family has its own belief system about what happens when someone dies.

Some believe in heaven, others believe there is no afterlife.

Some children may have worries that because someone took their own life they may not go to heaven.

It is important when explaining death to children that you reassure them and do not reinforce their anxieties and fears, but that children have a sense of peace and hope about the wellbeing of the person who has died.

**“I worried that my daddy would not have a safe journey to heaven because he died by suicide. Now I know my daddy is happy in heaven with God.”**



After a bereavement, a child no longer views the world as safe and secure and it will take time for them to feel safe again.

## Going back to school

It is very difficult returning to school and it is normal for a child to be anxious.

Schools have children's best interests at heart and will work with the family to support the bereaved child while in school.

It is important to have a plan for a child's return to school. Perhaps they could go in for mornings only in the first week



It is normal for a child to be anxious about separating from a parent or carer.

A parent needs to allow time to help a child to settle and reassure them about the time when they will return to collect them.

It is also very normal for a child to have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork. Teachers should understand this and offer flexibility. It is important to meet and discuss these issues.

Schools can best support the child if a parent/carer keeps them updated on how the child is coping.

# Remembering a person who has died

It is important to keep any significant items and memoirs for children; they will want to look at these to help them remember their loved one.

Other ways to remember someone:-

1. Light a candle when feeling particularly sad to communicate to the rest of family that you are missing the person who died.
2. Light a candle on special occasions, birthdays and anniversaries.
3. Frame a photo of the person.
4. Make a memory box/book to hold important and special items.
5. Plant a tree
6. Release a balloon with a tag with a message to the person that has died.
7. Write a letter to the person who died.
8. Share a meal that the person who died enjoyed.



# Children's Understanding of Death

Children's understanding of death will depend largely upon their developmental stage. The following guide is based on chronological ages and is a guide only, remembering that each child is unique.

## **0-2 years**

Children experience feelings of pain and loss. They will protest loudly and may search repeatedly for the deceased. They need a consistent routine, cuddles and hugs and they need to be told repeatedly that the person will not be returning. It is important that special memories and photographs are kept for the children, as they grow older.

## **2-5 years**

Children at this stage think 'literally' so use of language is extremely important.

Statements such as, 'gone for a long sleep' and 'we've lost her/him' can often cause confusion. They still do not understand the irreversibility of death and need to be told repeatedly that the dead cannot come back.

At this age, children may believe that their actions can impact on the world around them and that, in some way they may have caused

# Children's Understanding of Death

the death. They need to be told that people die for a variety of reasons, but not because of anything we think or say.

Children at this age will often act out through play what is happening around them. They need their questions answered openly, honestly and simply. It is also important to maintain consistent routine.

## 5-8 years

Children can usually understand that death is irreversible and universal. They will ask frequent questions about death and may become pre-occupied with thoughts of death. They may sometimes feel responsible for the surviving members and they need to be allowed to be children and not overwhelmed by adult responsibilities.



It helps if the child can explore feelings of guilt and responsibility and that their questions are answered openly and honestly. It is important that they get support at school, as often children who are bereaved feel different. They may have temper tantrums, sleep disturbance, nightmares and may regress.

**Remember children are resilient**

# Children's Understanding of Death

## **8-12 years**

Children usually at this stage understand that death is irreversible, universal and has a cause. Communication can become difficult and grief can be expressed in terms of physical aches and pains or challenging behaviour.

They need the opportunity to talk to a trusted adult. They need reassurance about changes in lifestyle e.g. the money situation and whether they can remain in their house. Also they need support at school in dealing with peer groups and they may be more vulnerable to bullying.

## **12-18 years**

Teenagers are particularly vulnerable as they are striving for independence and autonomy. Bereavement by its nature causes dependency, which can result in feelings of confusion, isolation and guilt.

They understand the concept of death, but do not have the emotional maturity to deal with it. It is normal for adolescents to have difficulty talking to their

## Children's Understanding of Death

parents, but they need the opportunity to talk to trusted adults or peers. School can provide security and routine however it can also be a place where they feel isolated, different and may have difficulties with school work.

Adolescents need choice with regard to the funeral and subsequent life changes. At the same time they should not be burdened with adult responsibilities, e.g. 'Be strong for your mother' or 'You're the man of the house now'.



# Supporting Adolescents following a Suicide

Adolescence can be a difficult and frightening time. Parents/carers often worry especially about their teenagers following a suicide. Many young people have friends who have taken their own lives and it is important that communication channels are kept open between adolescents and adults.



Key Messages are:

- Everyone has difficult times and it is important to share this with teenagers. Give them examples of difficult situations that you were in and how they were sorted and how things changed.
- Suicide leaves families and friends devastated. It is not an answer. Encourage young people to talk about the impact that death by suicide has on others.



# Supporting Adolescents following a Suicide

- Reassure adolescents that it is important to have fun and do ordinary things following a bereavement. Many young people feel they should not be enjoying themselves. Encourage them to resume activities they loved before the death.

## My child needs help

Most children adjust to their loss with the love and support of family. Sometimes children benefit from talking to a counsellor or social worker about their bereavement.

If a child is not sleeping or eating, is having difficulties in school, has had a major change in behaviour, or will not separate from a significant adult it is important that you seek advice from your GP or contact the Barnardo's helpline.

If your child was the first to discover the body of your loved one, they may be in trauma and in need of specialist help. If a child talks about wanting to kill themselves at any stage take these comments seriously and get immediate advice from your GP or Accident and Emergency Department.

As children and young people get older and gain understanding it is normal for them to have more questions about how someone died. It is important for them to revisit their experience and ask these questions.

## My child needs help

It can be difficult for adults to have to go over these painful events but it helps children in their grief journey to have these questions answered as honestly as possible.



**All children need a period of time to adjust to the loss of a significant family member, usually at least six months. During this time advice is available from Barnardo's helpline regarding any concern you may have about a child. After a natural period of adjustment of about six months after the death we encourage you to contact Barnardo's to discuss how you feel your child is coping and obtain advice as to whether they would benefit from further support at this time.**

# Contacts

For further help and advice  
contact: -

**Barnardo's Child Bereavement &  
School Support Service**  
453 Ormeau Road  
Belfast  
BT7 3GQ  
Tel: 028 9069 4000  
Helpline: 028 9064 5899  
[www.barnardos.org.uk/  
childbereavementservice](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/childbereavementservice)

## Funders and partners



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