

Explaining Suicide to Children

Suicide is a topic often surrounded by silence and shame; it is hard for most adults to understand and even harder to explain to children. However, if parents don't talk to their children about suicide, their children may hear about it elsewhere and may get inaccurate or confusing information.

We believe that children can cope with difficult situations as long as they can talk about it openly with their parents or guardians. Children work hard to make sense out of their world, and adults can help them with that task by providing information and reassurance.

Talk to the child in a calm, straightforward manner

Children look to you for cues and will pick up on your discomfort. They will benefit from your ability and willingness to help them understand.

Define suicide for your child

Suicide is when a person takes his or her own life, or does something to make himself or herself die. Most often, people who choose suicide are severely depressed and believe it is the only way to stop their pain. Linda Goldman, in her book *Breaking the Silence*, defines suicide for children as follows: **“Suicide is when people decide they do not want their body to work anymore and they stop their body from working. They are so, so sad or so, so angry or so, so depressed that their mind becomes mixed up. They forget they can get help. There is always another way.”** Many professionals discourage the use of the phrase “committed suicide” because of the negative connotations of the verb commit (e.g. crime, sin); you could instead say the person completed suicide, died by suicide, suicided, or took his/her own life.

Distinguish depression as a disease, which is different from the sadness and “depression” that many people experience occasionally. It is normal to occasionally feel sad, lonely, dispirited, or upset, sometimes for no reason, and we often call this depression. This is different from clinical depression, which can be a debilitating disease causing severe emotional pain, hopelessness, and inability to seek help or believe life can be better. People who choose suicide often believe that others will be better off without them. You might explain to a young child that when a person dies by suicide, their mind was sick and they were not able to think clearly and make good decisions.

Emphasize that suicide is not a solution to problems and there are always other choices

Medical treatment and counseling can help people who are severely depressed. Talk with your child about coping with sadness and other difficult feelings and help them identify things they can do such as talking with someone, or using art, music, writing or physical activity to express their feelings. Children may need reassurance that you will not choose suicide no matter how sad or upset you are, and that you will seek help if you or anyone in the family ever feels depressed or hopeless. (Do not offer false assurances. If you or your child are experiencing chronic or severe depression, get help immediately. Ele's Place staff can assist with referrals.)

It is okay to admit that you don't have all the answers

Even close family members may never know exactly why their loved one chose suicide. As outsiders we can extend our support and compassion to the survivors, being careful not to add to their pain by making judgments or assumptions. Answer your child's questions honestly, and help them to understand that even though we may feel suicide is a bad choice, people who take their own lives are still loved and missed by their families.

Share your beliefs about what makes life worth living, and your hopes for the future.

Nurture a sense of wonder, joy, and hope in yourself and your children. Be realistic about the challenges of life and seek help when needed, but also share an appreciation for the good things in life.
