



# Supporting **children** after suicide

Information for parents and other care givers

The following information has been written with the help of children and parents bereaved by suicide. The information is meant to be a guide to assist you in supporting your children. If you have any questions about this information or would like some extra support please contact one of the services contained at the back of this booklet.

For free support after a loss by suicide in WA call ARBOR  
on 9266 1029.

**About this booklet:**

This booklet has been adapted for use in Western Australia by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. The information was reviewed and adapted by the ARBOR support service for people bereaved by suicide.

Our thanks to ARBOR staff and client's children for their drawings which are used throughout this booklet.

The booklet was originally written by Kerrie Noonan and Alana Douglas as part of the Children Bereaved by Suicide Project. Kerrie Noonan is a Psychologist working as a Grief Counsellor at Liverpool Community Health Centre, Liverpool Health Service. Alana Douglas is a Psychologist working at Park House, Liverpool Paediatric Mental Health Service. Liverpool Community Health Centre and Park House are both services within South Western Sydney Area Health Service. The original authors gratefully acknowledge the parents and children who gave their time to participate in 'Children Bereaved by Suicide Project' in South Western Sydney, and the Health Promotion Team in SWSAHS, especially Cathie Gillan and Alison Sneddon, and the many people who reviewed the booklet.

This material has been reproduced with the permission of the NSW Department of Health from its publication 'Supporting Children after Suicide...Information for Parents and Other Care Givers.'

Reprinted October 2008 (WA)

ISBN: 1 875909 99 0

Copyright NSW Department of Health

# Supporting your child after suicide

When suicide occurs, most people describe feeling a range of emotions from shock and disbelief to anger and extreme sadness. These reactions can be difficult to cope with when there are also a number of practical things to deal with such as the funeral.

Many parents describe feeling worried and unsure about providing the best support and care for their children. The following information provides some brief guidelines that you may find helpful when supporting your children.

## Children and grief

Children express their feelings differently to adults! Don't be surprised if your child appears as though everything is ok. Children may want to go out and play with their friends as usual or they may appear to be unaffected. It's important for children to know that they don't have to feel sad all the time. Unlike adults, children grieve in "bits and pieces", they can't maintain the same emotional intensity for long periods like adults. They need time to make sense of the loss and all the changes that will accompany it.

Children express much of their grief through their behaviour – they may be clingy, irritable, have problems concentrating, play games involving death and violence, play out funerals, wet the bed or you may notice them wanting more of your attention than usual.

Children may become more clingy and anxious, and not want to leave your side. This is a normal reaction for children who have lost someone close to them, as often they worry that someone else they love might die. It's important to reassure children by giving them clear information about the times you will be away from them and when you return.



Maintaining your old routine as much as possible is important for children, as it helps them to feel secure and settled. For example, children need to go to bed at the same time, and go to their regular sporting or other activities if you feel they are up to it. Enlisting the help of a relative or friend may be helpful in assisting you to do this.

It's ok to cry and express your feelings in front of your children. Children are very sensitive to their parents' emotional state and can be very aware that their parents are "upset". Often children say that seeing their parents showing emotion makes them feel like it's ok for them to talk about their feelings and cry too! Parents are important role models for children, if you are showing your child that it's ok to talk about and show feelings then they will take your lead.

Like adults, all children express their grief differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve but if you are worried about your child, it may be helpful to speak to a Grief Counsellor or health professional.



## Talking to children about suicide

Often the first question that arises for parents is “what should I tell my children about suicide?” Many parents have had little experience talking with children about death let alone suicide, and are worried about how their children will react and how the news will affect their child in the long-term.

You may be feeling anxious about how much to tell your children and about the language to use when talking to your children about suicide. You will no doubt be given lots of welcome and unwelcome advice about what you should and shouldn't tell your child. You're the person who knows your child best, so trust your own instincts – use language that your child understands and that you find most comfortable.

Sometimes parents express the dilemma of wanting to tell their child the truth about suicide, but don't know if it is the right thing to do or how to go about it. It is a common experience, and often parents describe being fearful that the child, knowing their loved one died as a result of suicide, may make the situation worse.

One child who was not told until much later about his brother's suicide, said the following:

*“Come straight out and tell them... ‘cause I didn't really like it being told at different times. I'd rather just accept it the way it was.”*



## There are a number of reasons why telling children about suicide is important

- Children are very sensitive to change and will pick up that something is happening in their family that they don't know about.
- Children have a rich fantasy life and may make up stories to fill up the gaps in their knowledge about their death.
- Children may overhear, be told half-truths or gory stories by their friends and neighbours. This removes control from a caring parent or other adult, who ordinarily would ensure that they are told in a sensitive and appropriate way.
- 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.
- Children rely on factual information about the world in which they live from their parents and other adult caregivers. Trust is an important family value, keeping significant information like suicide from children can affect a child's developing trust.
- Parents often express great relief that they have spoken to their children about suicide. Often the secret of suicide and trying to cover up the facts adds further stress to the family coping. Many of the fears that caregivers have about causing greater distress for their children are not realised, as most children, even very young children, take the news in a very matter of fact way.

One parent commented on her situation:

*“I don’t think my son knows anything, but I am lying to him every time I tell him how his dad died and I feel terrible about that...”*

*I don’t know how to tell him.*

*I don’t know where to start.*

*I don’t want to hurt him.”*



# Parents often comment that it's hard to know what words to use when explaining suicide

The following tips have been useful for other parents:

- Explain death as being when the body stops working. For example, it can be helpful to say “When someone dies their heart stops beating, they can no longer move and play”.
- It's important to ask your child what they understand about what “being dead” means. It may be helpful to talk about a family pet that has died, as this is a way of explaining the permanency of death to children.
- It is not helpful to say that a person has gone away or they are just sleeping. These explanations are confusing and sometimes frightening for children.
- One way to define suicide is to describe it as “when someone makes their own body stop working”.
- Often children say that the word suicide is confusing, so it's important to check out what they have understood and perhaps even what they have heard about suicide in the past.

- Children may have heard about suicide from the TV, books and friends. This information can be confusing for children and inaccurate. Therefore, being up-front with children is helpful because it can dispel any misconceptions they have about suicide.
- Parents often worry that children will ask for more detail about the death. Children usually ask only what they need to know, and are satisfied with very simple, clear information. From time to time they may ask for a little more details and once again it's helpful to respond to these questions in a way that is age-appropriate for your child.

One child suggested the following:

*“...instead of saying they committed suicide, you could say he killed himself ...young people, they won't quite understand what you are talking about.”*



- Parents can be concerned that a child may copy suicidal behaviour, particularly if they appear sad or worried. It can be helpful to address these concerns by encouraging your child to talk about their feelings and worries. It is also important to help children to develop their own ideas about positive ways to solve problems. For example, giving children two or three ideas for solving a particular problem and helping them choose one which they think will be most helpful.

One parent suggested:

*“I explained to my sons that their brother was very unhappy and reached a point in his life where it was a split second that he could no longer see any hope or light or know that people loved him, so he took his life. Had he waited a second longer, he may have been able to realise he was loved and could get help.*

*I gave both my boys the numbers for Lifeline and all those numbers and told them it was really important to talk to someone even if it wasn't me.”*

- Children need to be told clearly that they are not responsible for the person's suicide. This may seem obvious, but children have said that it is important for them to be reassured of this often.

The following is an example of a parent talking to their child about suicide.

This is based on what children have said about the language parents could use.

*“...I have something to tell you .This morning we got some bad news... your Uncle Jeff has died... he killed himself. This means that he made his body stop working.*

*Do you understand what that means?*

*It seems he was very unhappy and he didn't know how to talk to anyone about how bad he felt. Sometimes people can't find a way out of their problems and that's why it's important to remember that there is always someone that you can talk to about your worries. We would have liked to have helped Uncle Jeff but his suicide has stopped us from doing that.*

*It's important that you know that Uncle Jeff loved you and it wasn't anything you did that made him feel so bad... the next few days are going to be sad for everyone, just remember that you can ask questions and talk about Uncle Jeff whenever you want to.”*

## What about the viewing and funeral?

The viewing and funeral are important opportunities to remember the person who has died and to say goodbye. It's normal to feel worried about involving children in the viewing and funeral, but children also need a chance to express their grief and remember the person who has died.

Children often say that being at the funeral and even being involved in preparing the service really helped them because they had the opportunity to express their grief and say goodbye. Children 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 and placing it on the coffin.

There is no right age for taking children to funerals, some people feel that it's important for children of all ages to be included. It sometimes helps to get a few opinions on what you should do, so speak to family members and friends. It can also be helpful to speak to a Grief Counsellor; they can help you examine the different options you have and may provide you with further helpful resources.

Sometimes parents are concerned that their own grief is so overwhelming, it may prevent them from looking after their child's needs as well. A way of dealing with this is to have a support person for your child, someone whom your child is close to and feels safe with. For example someone who is not closely affected by the death, such as a teacher or neighbour, but most importantly someone who will be supportive of your child.

## The viewing

Depending on where you live, your local hospital may have a social worker, nurse or funeral director that can support you and your children during the viewing at the hospital. In larger hospitals, and at the Coroner's Court in Perth (Coronial Counselling Service), Grief Counsellors are attached to these units to support family members and friends affected by a death. These services have a great deal of experience supporting families after a death and they will be able to answer any questions you may have about taking your children to the viewing.

It's important to note that the circumstances of each suicide are different and it's not always practical or possible for children to be included in the viewing. Parents ultimately need to make the best decision for their child. Keep in mind that counsellors are available to help you with this, and their role isn't to tell you what to do but support you while you consider your options.



At the viewing... it is helpful to go into the viewing room first so that you can then describe to your children what the room looks like, where the person will be and how they look. It may be necessary to tell your child that the person may look a little different to how they remember them.

One child commented:

***“...well I think it’s important that every child should be able to see the coffin that their father was put in before they are put in the fire and cremated... so that they can open the lid and see them for the last time.”***

Explain to your child that the viewing is a time to say goodbye without lots of people being there, and that they don’t have to stay very long. They can also take special photos or draw pictures to put in the coffin.

Sometimes it can be helpful to have a separate viewing for you and your children so that children can feel safe with their immediate family and their support person or counsellor.

## The funeral

Prepare your child. Some children have said that the funeral was confusing because they had never been to a funeral before and they did not understand what was happening. It's important to let your child know:

- Where and when the funeral will take place.
- Where the coffin will be.
- That people will be talking about the person who died.
- Who will be there.
- That some people will be sad and crying and others will be quiet.

Noise – children may well be noisy, this is normal. You may want to tell them it's a bit like being in the library when you have to talk and behave quietly. However because children do not have the same attention span as adults, it may be necessary to have your support person take your child outside for a break. It's ok to take along a colouring book or storybook to keep your child occupied during the service.

It is important to ask children if they would like to participate in the ceremony. Depending on the person conducting the funeral and the age of your child, some children may want to write a poem or share a memory. Ask children if they need some help to read out what they have written. Other children may choose to take a special bunch of flowers or memento to place on the coffin.

The following are some more ideas, that families have used at the viewing or funeral to support their children.

- Making some record of the funeral – such as taking photos, audio tape, (most chapels have recording facilities), and video taping. This is particularly helpful when you have very young children who will ask questions when they get older.
- Making hand and foot prints of the person who died.

The wake or family gathering after the funeral can be alienating or isolating for children. On the other hand children often talk about the wake as a “big party”. This is a common reaction for children. It may be helpful to have a room set up where they can play or watch a video.



## In the weeks after the funeral

It is helpful to let your child's teacher and school principal know what has happened and give permission for your child to talk to the school counsellor if necessary. Your child's teacher can also watch out for any changes in behaviour or signs that they are not coping so well.

You might find that sometimes your child acts as if nothing has happened. Remember children often don't grieve as outwardly as adults do, however like adults they often keep their feelings on the inside in order to protect the people around them. Don't assume that everything is ok, it's important to keep talking with children about how they're feeling.

Children may also have periods where they are distressed. While this is painful for you to see your child upset, it is an important part of the grief process. Hugs and your reassurance are the best support you can give your child. Just being there is really important.





Most parents describe feeling confused by the range of feelings that they and their children experience. You may find it helpful to talk to someone about how you and your child are coping. You will find some contact numbers for services that are experienced in supporting children and families bereaved by suicide.

**We hope that you have found this information helpful.**

**References used in the writing of this booklet were:**

Martin, G, Clark, S, Beckinsale, P, Skene, C, and Stacey, K.

Keep Yourself Alive Project: Prevention of suicide in young people a manual for Health Professionals. (1997)

Adelaide foundation studies. ISBN: 0646324241

Goldman, Linda. Breaking the Silence: A Guide to Help Children with Complicated Grief – Suicide, Homicide, AIDS, Violence and Abuse. (1996) London: Taylor & Francis.

# Reading list

## **Information and Support Pack for those bereaved by suicide or other sudden death**

Clark, Sandy, Hillman, Sharon, & MCSP  
MCSP, Perth, 2007.

Available from: [www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/preventingsuicide/resources](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/preventingsuicide/resources)

## **AFTER SUICIDE: Help for the Bereaved**

Clark, Sheila  
Hill of Content Publishing Company,  
Melbourne, Australia, 1995.

## **TALKING ABOUT DEATH: A dialogue between parent and child (3rd Ed)**

Grollman, Earl  
Boston: Beacon 1990.

## **STRAIGHT TALK about death with teenagers**

Grollman, Earl  
Boston: Beacon 1990.

## **No Time For Goodbyes**

Harris-Lord, Janice  
Millennium, Sydney, Australia, 1988.

## **Coping With Grief**

McKissock, Mal  
Australian Broadcasting Corporation,  
Sydney, 1997.

## **Breaking the Silence**

Goldman, Linda  
Brunner-Routledge, USA, 2001.

## **The Last Taboo: Suicide Among Children And Adolescents**

Fabian, Suzane  
Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria,  
1986.

## **Picking Up Life's Pieces ... After A Suicide – A Hope And Help Handbook**

Treize, Eric and Lynn, Rodney  
TEAKL Education Pty Ltd, Bonville,  
NSW, 1997.

## **But I Didn't Say Goodbye**

For parents and professionals helping  
child suicide survivors  
Rubel, Barbara  
New Jersey, Griefwork Center Inc,  
1999.

## **35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child**

The Dougy Center  
USA, The Dougy Center, 2004.

## **Help Me Say Goodbye**

Activities for helping kids cope when a  
special person dies  
Silverman, Janis  
USA, Fairview Press, 1999.

## **After a Suicide Death**

An activity book for grieving kids  
The Dougy Center  
USA, The Dougy Center, 2004.

## Services

For support after a loss by suicide in the Perth Metropolitan area call ARBOR. The Duty Counsellor is available Monday to Friday from 9am to 4pm.

**ARBOR - 9266 1029**

**or see [www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/preventingsuicide/arbor](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/preventingsuicide/arbor)**

For free 24 hour telephone support:

**Samaritans - 9381 5555**

**Lifeline - 13 11 14**

**Kids Help Line - 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-25)**

## Websites

**[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)**

**[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)**

**[www.kidshelpline.com.au](http://www.kidshelpline.com.au)**

**[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)**

**[www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/preventingsuicide](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/preventingsuicide)**



ARBOR is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing through the National Suicide Prevention Strategy. ARBOR is an initiative of the Centre for Developmental Health, Curtin University of Technology, and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.