

After a suicide

Supporting a child or young person

A suicide death is uniquely difficult for everyone, especially children and young people who have loved or known well the person who has died. They will experience grief in their own ways. The adults around them will usually be coping with their own grief at the same time. When we can give our hurting children and young people aroha and good support, it can help the whole family and whānau.

Telling them the news

The importance of telling them

Telling your child or young person the sad news is not easy. Instinctively we want to protect them. However, it's very important to talk with them honestly. Doing this right from the start protects them from hearing the news insensitively from others. Secrets have a way of getting out and causing great harm. Giving them truthful, age-appropriate information helps them to grieve in a healthy way and builds trust so you can be someone they can confidently trust in the future.

“ A hurting child or young person needs their parents or caregivers to be open, honest, reassuring, caring, and willing to answer their questions as best they can.

CONTACT

Victim Support

Get Help: 0800 VICTIM (0800 842 846)
enquiries@victimsupport.org.nz
victimsupport.org.nz



Are you the right person to tell them?

It is best if a parent, primary caregiver, or a close and familiar relative tells them. You can have another person with you when you tell them.

Don't wait too long

A delay in telling them might mean they hear it from others, maybe in a harmful and confusing way. Children are observant and pick up on tension in adults around them. They will know something is wrong.

Choose a safe, quiet place

Find a private and comfortable place where you won't be interrupted. Turn your phone off. Perhaps have some of their favourite things nearby, especially for younger children.

Prepare yourself first

Take a few minutes to settle yourself. Take some slow, deep breaths. If you have another person with you, choose someone the children or young people also know and trust. If it would help, go over what you want to say by practicing it aloud. Once we have heard ourselves say the words once, it can make it a little easier.



Some helpful things

- Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in words they can understand. See the next page for some suggested words to explain what suicide means.
- The *most* important piece of information to share first is that the person has died. They're likely to then ask you how. Telling them that the person died by suicide, and explaining what suicide means, will help them to better understand what's happened.
- If you think they might have already heard the news, check what they know, in case they have been told things that are wrong or confusing for them.
- Give small pieces of information at a time. There will be a lot for them to take in all at once.
- You might need to repeat the information. Shock makes it hard to take information in.
- Use non-judgemental language. Speak respectfully of the person who has died.
- They may ask questions, perhaps very blunt or random ones. Answer as best you can. Allow their questions to guide the conversation.
- Let them know they can talk with you some more about what's happened whenever they need to.
- It's okay if you feel tearful. A child or young person can sense this is a serious, sad time. If you get very distressed, take a minute to get some control before continuing.
- They will need reassurance from you. Use caring eye contact. They might need a hug, or their hand held. Be kind and let them know they are being looked after, and by whom.
- They might ask unrelated questions or start to do an activity to distract themselves. This may seem puzzling but is normal. They are just working through the news in their own way.
- Wait for them to come back to you when they're ready to know more or ask more. In the meantime, be loving, kind, and caring.



Tell the truth

Being honest and open about a death is an important first step to help grieving children and young people. Explain simply that the person has died, and that they died by suicide. Let their questions help you know what else they want to know. Don't describe lots of graphic details about the death, such as about the method or location. This can be scary and harmful. Answer any questions they may have honestly with short, matter of fact details, as best you can.

How children and young people understand death will depend on their age and stage of development. Younger children do not usually understand that death is permanent. Gently explain that when someone dies their body stops working and it cannot be fixed. For any age, avoid euphemisms such as 'gone to sleep', 'gone away', or 'was lost.' These terms can confuse them a lot and even be frightening. It's okay to say they died.

Your family and whānau may also have faith or cultural beliefs about death and dying that you may want to explain to them. Keep these explanations simple.

Talking with them about what's happened is likely to be needed more than once. You may have conversations about it in the days, months, or years ahead. As the child or young person grows up, they might have new questions to ask.

If finding the words is hard

The following words are some suggested ideas, but choose words that you feel are right to say and that suit your child or young person's age and stage.

For younger children, a simple sentence or two can be enough until they come to you with any questions.

"I have some very sad news to tell you about X. X has died."

"They died by suicide. This means they did something to make their body stop working."

or

"I have some very sad news to tell you about X. X has died."

"They died by suicide. This means they did something to make themselves die."

For older children and young people, a longer explanation will probably be needed.

"I have some very sad news to tell you about X. X has died."

"They died by suicide. People who die by suicide are often extremely sad and hurting inside. They become very overwhelmed and so unwell in their minds that they can't think clearly. Sadly, they do something to make themselves die. This is what has happened to X."

Explain that it's important to always talk to someone we trust when we're feeling really bad inside. There are always people who can help us with whatever is causing us pain and hurt inside.

Let them know that although we might have lots of questions, we just don't have the answers to all of them. But we do know for certain that we loved/cared about X and that they loved/cared about us. They will always be very important to us for as long as we live.

We can remind children and young people that everyone's life has a beginning and an ending but it's the life in between that counts the most.

"How X died is not as important as how they lived. We can keep remembering the good things about them and the good times we had with them. We will always miss them and can always carry them in our hearts."



“ Every time you talk about suicide, remind them of ways we can ask for help from others – and talk about who those people could be.



The words we use when we talk about suicide

There is still some negative stigma around suicide. Children and young people can pick up on it. The words we use can help people understand suicide better, such as saying the person “committed suicide” suggests a crime was committed, when it wasn’t, or saying a suicide was ‘successful’ suggests it was something to be proud of.

Instead of
‘committed suicide’
you could say they...



‘died by suicide’
‘took their own life’
‘ended their own life’

When they ask questions

If they ask, don’t go into detail about how, or the location of the suicide death.

It can be traumatising and make suicide seem normal. If they do know some details, talk about them briefly, giving short, key facts. Do your best, instead, to focus on how the person lived, rather than on how they died.

Grieving children and young people often want to know more about why the person died.

There is never just one cause of a suicide death. It is complicated. Be ready with a simple but honest answer:

“We don’t know exactly why, but we think he/she got very overwhelmed and his/her thoughts got very confused. He/she wanted their terrible pain inside to stop and so they made themselves die. It will always be very sad. There are always people who can help when a person hurts this much.”
(You may like to chat together about the people who can help.)

If they are older, and the person had been unwell with depression, you may like to talk about depression together. Go to www.depression.org.nz/ for a useful website about depression. Remind them that it isn’t our fault that we get unwell, but it’s important to do things that help us feel better and become well again, including asking others for some help when we need it. Talk together about things any of us can do when we’re not feeling good inside.

Don’t give them more information than they want.

They can ask for more later.

If they’re worried more suicide might happen.

Take this opportunity to talk about how important it is to be kind to others and to encourage a person to ask for help and support if they feel bad inside. Talk about why asking for help is a good thing to do when any of us need it and how to ask for it.

If you don’t know an answer to their questions

You don’t need to have all the answers, you can just say, “What a good question but I don’t know. If I find out I will let you know.”



Telling their friends and others

It can be helpful to chat together about what they may, or may not, want to tell friends, their teacher or dean if in secondary school, or others. People can be curious and even pushy. Explain they don't have to talk about it if they don't want to. Coming up with some things they'd feel okay to say and practising these together with them can build their confidence.

Talk about how to use social media safely, and how to respond to any mean comments or inappropriate questions.

“ We sat on the couch and talked about what to say if their friends asked questions. They said the words out loud and it helped a lot, because the questions did come.



Common reactions to a suicide loss

Like adults, children or young people can experience all kinds of reactions after a suicide loss. Their brains have a lot to take in and process. Grief will often come in waves. They might be very upset and then suddenly act like nothing has happened. This is because they can only take in so much at a time. It can be a very up and down time – whatever their age or stage.

Let them know that their reactions are normal, and everyone grieves in their own way. Be understanding and supportive, however they react.

Emotions

- shocked, confused, numb
- in denial – can't believe it's true, acting like it isn't
- rejected, abandoned – *Didn't they love me/us? Why did they leave me?*
- guilty – *Was it my fault? What could I have said or done to stop this?*
- sad and tearful – *They are not here anymore and never will be again*
- angry – at the person, others who they blame, or at their God, gods, or the universe
- worried and anxious – Will someone else I know die too? Who is going to look after me now?
- shamed, embarrassed, whakamā – *What will others think?*
- lonely – *No one else understands what this is like, I feel very alone*
- relieved – if the person has been attempting or threatening suicide over a long time

Thoughts

- what ifs – *If I or others had...*
- hard to focus on things, more easily distracted
- forgetful
- slower responses to questions or directions
- troubling memories, distressing imagined thoughts
- nightmares, flashbacks – reliving things they experienced

Physical

- feeling nauseous, stomach aches, headaches, body aches
- eating less or more
- sleeping less or more
- existing conditions get worse
- temporary physical developmental regression, such as using favourite comfort items again (blanket, toy), separation anxiety, a loss of confidence, bedwetting/soiling might start, speech confidence decreases

Behaviour

- avoids talking about it, or wanting to talk about it a lot
- may choose to hide the news from other people
- withdrawing from others, or spending more time with others/clingy
- more fretful, irritable, acting out, more tantrums
- temporary developmental regression, such as using favourite comfort items again (blanket, toy), separation anxiety, a loss of confidence, bedwetting/soiling might start, speech confidence decreases

Spiritual

- searching for answers and meaning – *Why did they do this? What happened?*
- looking for the person who has died
- sensing the presence of the person who has died
- leaning on their culture and/or faith and beliefs
- having big questions about life and death



Supporting a child or young person who may have discovered or witnessed a suicide

If they saw the suicide happen or saw or found the person's body, they will need loving support and understanding from caring adults around them. They may also need help from professionals with trauma support skills.

First steps

- In a quiet place, gently ask them what happened to them. Keep it simple. They may not remember much at first and it may come back to them later. They might not want to talk because they're in shock or very frightened. Just be with them quietly instead.
- Let them know you understand it was scary for them, and they're safe.
- This is a very traumatic and overwhelming experience and it could be a very troubling time for them. They're likely to have some physical reactions, like feeling sick, headaches, stomach aches, being shaky, bedwetting, or less appetite. Difficult memories could keep coming back. They might find it hard to sleep and have bad dreams about what they saw.
- Arrange for them to see a doctor, counsellor, or psychologist to help work through any negative effects of what they have experienced. Ask your Support Worker about this or call us 24/7 on **0800 842 846** to be connected with a Support Worker.

For further suggestions, see:

- Advice on supporting your kids after a traumatic event (Ministry of Health)
<https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/supporting-your-kids-after-a-traumatic-event-16mar2018-v2.docx>
- Helping Children after Trauma (Ministry of Health)
<https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/emergency-management/managing-stress-emergency/helping-children>



Ways to provide support

To help your child or young person through their grief, let them share what they're thinking and feeling. Listen to their memories and stories of the person who died. Share your stories. Show them that it's okay to cry or laugh and that they are not alone on this journey.

Reassure them...

They are not alone – others are here to love and support them. Remind them who whose people are.

This is not their fault. Nothing they said or did, or didn't say or do, caused this death. Repeat this more than once.

They can talk about the person and what's happened with people they trust, whenever they want to. Talk to them about who these people might be.

Everyone grieves a loss like this in different ways – it's okay to grieve in their own way. Their reactions are normal, even if they don't feel like they are.

They won't always feel like they do now. Their grief will slowly become less strong, but it usually takes time and that's okay. We are grieving and feeling sad because we cared about the person very much. Even though difficult reminders and 'waves of grief' will come along, we will get through those times one step at a time.

There are things we can do that can help us during this sad time. Talk about ways to look after ourselves. Eating healthy food, getting enough rest and sleep, keeping up our daily routines, school, and regular activities, talking to people we trust, asking for help if we need it, expressing our grief when we need to, spending time with people we like being with, and doing things we enjoy.



Don't...

Tell a child or young person how they should feel, or discourage them from expressing their grief, including strong emotions like anger.

Avoid saying the name of the person who died. Use it respectfully.

Talk negatively about the person who died. Don't criticise them.

Provide details about the method of death. Research shows this can encourage others to think about doing the same thing. If they know details, encourage them to not share these with others.

Do...

Keep up their routines as much as possible – this brings some certainty.

Give them regular attention – continue to reassure and encourage, listen to them.

Understand they may have a variety of reactions for a while and be flexible.

Understand they may communicate their feelings through behaviours rather than words – help them find some positive ways to express and release what is inside.

Give them space to play, be creative, and distract themselves.

Help them find ways to remember the person who died.

Give them choices – this helps when everything else seems out of their control.

Talk about who can give them help and support - normalise asking for help when they need it.

Be in touch with their school to let them know what has happened. Check what support can be provided for them, if needed.

Get extra help for them if needed.

Help them know they won't always feel how they do now, and they'll be loved and cared about through this sad time.

Use support for yourself – this can be hard.

“Keep up their routines as much as possible to provide some normality and certainty, but be flexible too. Sometimes doing things differently might be what they need most right now.”



Be there for them as long as they need you

Just like adults, children and young people will be grieving *and* trying to make sense of what happened. This will take them the time it needs to take. Don't be surprised if, months or years later, a child or young person experiences fresh grief or struggles with new questions about their loved one's suicide death. They might grieve in new ways as they reach various milestones. Be there for them as they grow. Build up a trusting relationship together, so they will come to you should they ever need support.

Keeping them safe from suicide in the future

When a child or young person has had someone close to them die by suicide, they are at greater risk of having suicidal thoughts themselves – now or later in life. Being able to talk together about suicide and mental health honestly, making asking for help normal, building a trusting relationship, and supporting them through the good times and the hard times builds resilience. These all help to keep them safe.

The *Connecting Through Kōrero* guidebook and videos are New Zealand resources offering wise suggestions for parents and other caring adults wanting to keep their young person safe and informed about suicide.
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/connecting-through-korero/>



If you're worried about a child or young person

Don't hesitate to seek extra help. Contact a doctor, their teacher or senior school staff member, counsellor, psychologist, social worker, community or youth worker, or a local family support agency. You can also talk with one of our Support Workers about options for local support services. You can call us 24/7 on 0800 842 846 to be connected with a Support Worker. We are here for you.

Look after yourself

Take time to look after your own well-being - you also matter. Use the support around you.

If you have also been bereaved by the person's death, see our Suicide support section under *Get Support* on our website. www.victimsupport.org.nz.

Victim Support is here to support you and your family or whānau any time. Our support is completely free and confidential, and available throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. You can call us 24/7 on 0800 842 846 to be connected with a Support Worker.

Contact your doctor if you become unwell or find sleeping or your levels of stress and anxiety difficult. You can also call the free support phone line 1737 to speak to a trained counsellor, 24/7.

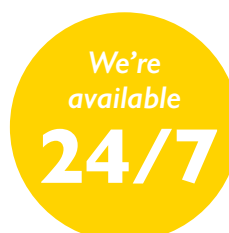
Other helpful resources

Conversations Matters – Telling a Child about suicide (Australia) - Notes and podcasts
<https://conversationsmatter.org.au/resources/telling-a-child-about-suicide/>

Children, Teens and Suicide Loss - Helpful suggestions about supporting a child or teen, such as getting back to school, funeral concerns, and keeping them safe from suicide themselves in the future.
<https://aws-fetch.s3.amazonaws.com/flipbooks/childrenteenssuicideloss/index.html?page=1>

Connecting through Kōrero: Talking about suicide at any time with taiohi/young people.
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/connecting-through-korerol/>

Support after Suicide Resources for children, teens, parents and caring adults
<http://www.shelleybrunskillmatson.com/>



**Our service is
free, personal,
and confidential**





Recommended Resources

Trauma - How To Talk To Your Kids About It (Kidshealth NZ)

Some resources, in a range of languages, about how to talk to kids about trauma can be found on the NZ Kids Health website at www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about

NZ Ministry of Education info sheets for Parents/Caregivers

This information was developed following the Canterbury earthquakes in 2011, however the advice remains relevant after any major traumatic event. Scroll down to After an Emergency resources to Supporting People to see the range available.

www.education.govt.nz/school/health-safety-and-wellbeing/emergencies-and-traumatic-incidents/

Skylight resources and support packs

Skylight makes available for purchase or loan a wide range of resources for all ages and stages, including the workbooks *Something Has Happened* (3-6 year olds) and *When Tough Stuff Happens* (7-12 year olds). They also offer free information packs tailored to your child's situation. Phone them 0800 299 100 or 04 939 6767 weekdays, or visit www.skylight.org.nz

Counselling Support Options

Different organisations around the country offer counselling and support for children and young people.

These links provide a list of the ways you can look for a child or youth counsellor in your area.

- Search for services in your own area on this online Family Services Directory: <https://family.services.govt.nz/#/> Look in the category *Family/Whānau* services for *Counselling*, then add in your location.
- www.talkingworks.co.nz (Talking Works)
- NZ Association of Counsellors 04 471 0307 www.nzac.org.nz - see search for a NZAC Counsellor
- NZ College of Clinical Psychologists 04 472 4088 includes a directory and downloadable lists: *Find a Clinical Psychologist*
- NZ Psychological Society 04 473 4889 www.psychology.org.nz includes a directory: *Find a Psychologist*
- www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/find-a-gp-or-counsellor (NZ Mental Health Foundation)

Or call or text 1737 to talk to a trained counsellor about your concerns (24/7) and find out about services in your area.

Examples of national organisations you can contact include:

- Barnardos
www.barnardos.org.nz 0800 BARNARDOS (0800 227 627)
- Skylight
www.skylight.org.nz FREEPHONE: 0800 299 100
- Family Works, Provided by Presbyterian Support Services.
www.familyworks.org.nz 0508 TO HELP (0508 864 357)
- Māori Women's Welfare League offers Whānau Toko i te Ora parenting programme for under five-year-olds. Branches throughout New Zealand. Email mwwl@mwwl.org.nz Phone 04 473 6451

In crisis right now?

- For urgent mental health support for your child or young person in your area see www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/ for a list of your local DHB services for children and young people
- If it is an emergency, such as a suicide threat, call 111 and ask for assistance, or visit a doctor or hospital emergency department as soon as possible with your child or young person.

Helplines for children and young people

- *What's Up*
Kids and teenagers up to 18 years old can talk with professional counsellors. Available 1pm–11pm daily. (Barnardos) 0800 WHATS UP (0800 942 8787)
- *Kidsline*
Kids up to 14 years old can talk with teenage volunteers, who are supervised by adults. Daily after school 4pm–6pm. (Lifeline Aotearoa) 0800 KIDSLINE (0800 543 754)
- *Youthline*
Confidential youth help and information. For intermediate-aged kids and older. 0800 376 633 Free txt: 234 webchat at www.youthline.co.nz

Victim Support

0800 842 846 www.victimsupport.org.nz

We can support parents and whānau with information, support, and coping tools, and help you find the right local services for your child or young person's needs.