

# Penhaligon's Friends

## Explaining Suicide to Children



Breaking any bad news to children can be the worst thing to have to do. You are faced with a situation you probably never thought you would be in. Explaining to your child that someone may have chosen to take their own life is extremely difficult and it can be hard to know where to start.

It is important that the information your child has comes from you – you are the person they love and trust.

Whilst you will want to protect your child from this difficult information and the pain of grief that comes with it, it is important to be honest with your child. You can be honest in a way that doesn't give them too much information at once and helps them manage the road that is ahead of them in a healthy way.

- Give them a warning shot – explain to your child that you have some bad news to tell them.
- Explain that the person has died.
- Start with a simple explanation at this stage such as;
  - o 'daddy was found dead in the car'
  - o 'they died in the garage'
  - o 'mummy was found dead at the beach'
  - o 'mummy took too much medicine'

**You can build on this information over time – whilst the truth may seem hard, it can be far more damaging to a child if they are told things that are not true.**

- If appropriate, explain that at the moment we are not exactly sure what caused them to die.
- Explain that it must have been a very serious reason for them to have died.
- You can let them know that experts such as the Police and the Coroner will be working to try and find out what happened.
- Reassure them that you will tell them more when you know more.
- Reassure them that it is ok to ask you any questions they may have.
- If your child asks you directly if the person chose to kill him/herself, be honest -say that 'it may have been the case' or that 'it seems they may have done'.
- You may not have all the answers! It is ok to tell the children that you don't know something – it is better to talk with them about how hard it is when there are things you don't know.
- When appropriate, explain that the person chose to end their life/die/that they stopped their body from working.

**Your child may be ready for this information straight away after the initial information you have given them, or it may be quite a long time after that you give them more details.**

**Information needs to be given at a level appropriate to the age and developmental understanding of your child.**

- You may need to give your child more details quickly if there is a possibility of your child finding anything out from someone or somewhere else – bad news and rumors travel fast!
- In many situations, your child is likely to find out the truth from someone else, the internet or from the media.

- The trust your child has for you may be damaged if they feel you have lied to them – this can cause ongoing and future problems with the relationship you have with your child. It can also cause difficulties for your child in other future relationships they have.
- A child who overhears information, or hears it from somewhere else, may feel unable to tell you that they know what happened – or they think they know what happened!
- Being honest when you answer your child's questions will help them understand that they can trust you.
- Being honest can mean that your child is more likely to talk to you about their worries and feelings. Not just now but in the future too.
- Talking with you is better than your child being left trying to cope on their own.
- What your child may make up in their imagination can be more frightening for them than the truth!
- Talking to your child about difficult things, as hard as it may feel, will allow them to share the natural feelings and worries they may have.
- Avoid giving your child unnecessary details about the death
- Your child will need lots of continued reassurance that this was not their fault

Suicide simply means that someone caused his or her death intentionally. It can be helpful for children to understand that for someone to do this they must have been thinking in a way that they wouldn't normally think.

You may choose to explain this as something serious going wrong in their brain – like a serious illness. It may be that the person suffered with depression. If so, it will be important to explain this and reassure your child that not everyone who experiences depression will end their life. Explain that many people can manage depression really well and get well again with help from Doctors and other support.

Explain to your child that people, including you and them, get sad or low at times and this is very different to how somebody must have been feeling to end their life.

Your child needs to understand that the person who died loved them but because of their brain not working as it should, they were unable to think of that at that point in time.

When someone ends their life it is because they don't think there is any way of feeling better - even when everyone else around them can see there is.

If they had been thinking like they did the rest of the time then they would have known that we would have helped them, and that we loved them.

Sadly, there are some times when even someone getting the best medical help doesn't make them better.

You may find that your child becomes more anxious now, particularly when they see other people they care about upset or depressed. They will need your help to feel understood and given reassurance that being sad or upset is normal. Explain that it is very different to how the person who died may have been feeling and thinking.

Remember that depression is often a normal part of grief and they may even experience this themselves. Again, reassure your child that this is different. Discuss with them how there are ways of getting help with difficult feelings and thoughts, encourage them to get support if they need it- if appropriate, you can talk about how the person who died didn't or wasn't able to ask for help.

Your child may need to discuss what has happened again and again over time. As they get older it is normal for them to go through different emotions and want to know more. They will be changing developmentally and their understanding of the world will be changing too – their grief and what has

happened is now part of their life story and, whilst you can't take away what has happened, you can help them cope with it in a healthy way.

Seek support if you are concerned about your child from your GP, School or Penhaligon's Friends.

Ensure that your child's school is aware of what has happened. Let them know that they can contact Penhaligon's Friends for advice on how best to support your child in school if they feel that would be helpful.

Seek support for yourself too – children can cope much better if they see their parent/carer taking care of themselves and their grief.