

Supporting Children After Suicide - Guidance for Parents, Carers and Schools

When someone dies by suicide, children and young people grieve in ways that are different from adults. They may struggle to understand, ask direct questions, or show their feelings through behaviour rather than words. This guide offers immediate steps, language suggestions, and school support tips.

How children experience grief

- Early years (under 6): Children may not understand death is permanent. They might repeatedly ask where the person is, or expect them to return.
- Primary age (6-11): Children may begin to understand death is final but can misinterpret suicide as abandonment or blame themselves.
- Teens (12+): Adolescents may fully understand but struggle with overwhelming emotions, risk-taking, anger, or withdrawal.

Language scripts (what to say / not to say)

Helpful to say:

- "I need to tell you something very sad. [Name] has died."
- "When people die, their body stops working and they cannot come back."
- "[Name] died because they were very unwell in their mind. It was not your fault."
- "You can ask me any questions, and I will answer as honestly as I can."

Avoid saying:

- "Gone to sleep" - children may fear going to sleep themselves.
- "Passed away" - vague terms can confuse children.
- "They are in a better place" - can cause guilt or confusion.
- "You must be brave" - discourages them from showing feelings.

Supporting routines and feelings

- Keep to familiar routines as much as possible; this provides security.
- Encourage expression through play, art, writing, or talking.
- Expect regressive behaviours (bedwetting, clinginess) and respond calmly.
- Offer choices where possible, to help restore a sense of control.
- Model healthy coping - let children see that it is okay to cry and talk about feelings.

Tips for schools and teachers

- Inform key staff (teachers, pastoral leads) promptly and sensitively.
- Agree with parents what will be said to classmates; avoid rumours or secrecy.
- Provide a safe space for the child if overwhelmed (quiet room, trusted adult).
- Watch for changes in concentration, behaviour, attendance.
- Offer flexibility with homework and expectations; grief affects focus.
- Encourage peer support but monitor for bullying or unkind comments.

Helplines & resources for children and families

Service	Support offered	Contact
Childline	Free, confidential support for children and young people	Call: 0800 1111 www.childline.org.uk
Winston's Wish	Specialist support for bereaved children after suicide	Helpline: 08088 020 021 www.winstonswish.org
YoungMinds	Support for young people's mental health	Text: YM to 85258 www.youngminds.org.uk
Samaritans	24/7 listening support (for adults and teens)	Call: 116 123 www.samaritans.org
Breathing Space (Scotland)	Confidential phone support in Scotland	Call: 0800 83 85 87 www.breathingspace.scot

Disclaimer: This guide is for information and immediate support only. It is not a substitute for professional medical, therapeutic or legal advice. If you or a child are in crisis, call emergency services (999 in the UK) or use the helplines above.