

## Talking to Children About Suicide

When a loved one dies by suicide there will be lots of confusing and different feelings that are hard to find the words for. Children need reassurance that they are loved and that nothing they did caused the death. Most children will have a limited understanding about what suicide means and will look for information from adults that they trust, to help them make sense of this raw and painful experience. Your readiness to listen, talk and support will assist their understanding and help them develop the resilience to cope. It's important to remember you don't have to have all the answers – it's ok to say to a child, "I don't know – I find it very confusing too – maybe together we can figure some of this out". Research supports providing an honest, age-appropriate explanation about the death, rather than ambiguous half-truths. When children are given incorrect information it's like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces, and this can add to their confusion and distress. Children will probably want to talk more about as they get older and their understanding develops.

Often children don't understand what the word suicide means. You can explain that suicide is the word used when somebody has made their own body stop working. It's another way of saying that they killed themselves. There are many reasons why somebody would do this. Sometimes it is because of a brain illness, other times maybe because they had lots of really big problems that they didn't know how to get help for. It's important to stress that it was incredibly sad that they didn't understand that if they had told people about their problems, they could have received the help they needed. Suicide is never a way to solve problems. Generally children will have lots of "why" questions and there may be worries that something else bad is going to happen. Children can feel a sense of abandonment from the loved one – as one child said about her dad, "I think he loved me but I don't know". Children all grieve in their own unique way, but at first most children will be concerned to understand how the death affects their world of home, school, friends and their primary relationships of care. Maintaining normal routines will promote a sense of safety, and when appropriate, including children in decision-making will reduce feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability. Conversations about good memories and the loved one's special qualities are important and it's good to let children know that although what has happened is very sad their loved one would want them to have good times and be happy.

(Diana Sands, PhD, Director, Centre for Intense Grief, author book and DVD 'Red Chocolate Elephants: For Children Bereaved by Suicide' (2010), Sydney, Australia, Karridale)