

When children grieve

An excerpt from *Hope and Healing After Suicide*

Children do not show their feelings in the same way adults do. You may see their emotions expressed in their behaviour and play. And they may talk about their feelings with other children rather than with adults.

Sometimes children look as though they have not been affected by the death. They may cry for a while and then return to play and within moments be laughing—this is because their words and behaviour do not always reflect how they feel inside. Adults often misinterpret this behaviour as a lack of capacity to grieve; however, what adults are observing is the child mourning in manageable chunks.

It is common for children, as they grow, to grieve the loss of a loved family member at a later time. They may develop new feelings and new responses to the death, even years after the suicide. They often ask different questions as they try to understand what happened from a more mature point of view.

And they may experience grief again as they pass through various developmental events, such as graduations, proms, getting their first job, getting married and the birth of their first child.

Children need to deal with their grief. Be available to talk with them about the death, or have them talk to someone else they and you trust.

Signs of children's grief

Like adults, the ways in which children express their grief varies from child to child. The following signs may indicate that a child is mourning the death:

- questions; for example, about why the person died and when they are coming back
- regressive behaviour, such as thumb sucking
- fear of separation from a surviving parent or other important people in their lives
- clingy behaviour
- anger, such as having temper tantrums or being non-compliant
- physical problems, such as loss of appetite, nightmares and having trouble sleeping
- anxiety about school: this could appear as irritability, withdrawal or difficulty concentrating and may be interpreted as behavioural problems.

This resource is adapted from the “Hope and healing after suicide: A practical guide for people who have lost someone to suicide in Ontario.” Download the full guide at www.camh.ca/hopeandhealing.

If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide, you are deserving of help. Please explore resources at www.camh.ca/gethelp. If you feel safe in the moment, follow up with your family physician or care team. If you require immediate, in-person emergency care, call 911, or go to your nearest emergency department.

Developmental stages and perceptions of death

The age of a child at the time of the death will affect how he or she responds to it.

Four years and younger

Children at this age may not understand the differences between life and death. Children who are four and under:

- often think in concrete terms
- may associate death with sleep
- may not see death as final
- engage in “magical thinking”; for example, children do not have a sense of permanence: they believe the deceased person can return or that they can visit the deceased.

Around five to eight years

Children at this age are learning to see death as final for all living things, including themselves. They may:

- ask many questions
- be curious about what happens to the body
- engage in magical thinking—this could show up as thought processes indicating the child thinks he or she caused the death or fears that death is contagious.

Around nine to 12 years

Children in the preteen years of nine to 12:

- realize that death can happen to anyone, whether they are young or old
- may continue to believe they are invincible
- understand that memories keep the person alive.

Ways to help young people cope with grief

For young people, the seriousness of the loss takes them beyond the innocence of childhood. Their world is shattered. Their once-predictable life has become uncertain and frightening. Yet grieving children and teens are amazingly resilient and, with support from loved ones, can grieve and begin healing. Children and teens need this support, regardless of how they seem to be coping. Demonstrations of love and ongoing support are the greatest gifts you can give a grieving child or teen. If you are also grieving, make sure that you have your own supports, while also supporting your children.

There are many ways you can help children and teens cope with the death and their ensuing grief. Here are some suggestions.

Talking about the death

- Be “present” and focused and listen to what they are saying—and what they are not saying.
- Do not force young people to talk about the death. Wait until they are ready.

- Create a loving and safe environment where young people can ask questions.
- Answer questions. If young people do not get their questions answered, they fill in the blanks and use their imaginations to come up with scenarios that are often worse.
- Respond only to what the young person is asking about. Do not provide more information than asked for.
- Accurately describe what has occurred with concepts and words the young person can understand. For example, do not say “Auntie is sleeping”; instead, you could say “Auntie was sick and chose to make her body stop working.”
- Encourage children and teens to express their thoughts, feelings and fears. Help them to identify these feelings.
- Make sure young people know it is okay to feel happy as well as sad. Feeling happy (or feeling better) does not mean that they are not sad about the death or that they have forgotten the person.

Keeping up routines

- Provide consistency and routines for children and teens.
- Engage young people in activities that can take their minds off what has happened or can help them celebrate the person’s life. This could include drawing, moulding clay, writing, playing with toys, making a memory picture book or a memory box with favourite mementos, framing a picture of the person, planting a tree or garden in the person’s honour, lighting a memorial candle or visiting the cemetery.

Additional resources

In this series:

- When children grieve
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-When_children_grieve.pdf
- When teens grieve
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-When_teens_grieve.pdf
- When someone close to you dies by suicide
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-Someone_close.pdf
- Working through the grief
www.camh.ca/-/media/files/Hope_and_Healing-Working_through_grief.pdf

Where can I get help in a crisis?

- CAMH Crisis Resources
www.camh.ca/crisisresources
- The CAMH emergency department in Toronto is open 24/7
www.camh.ca/ED

Where else can I find treatment or support?

- The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention provides links to supports across Canada. <https://suicideprevention.ca/Need-Help>
- Bereaved Families of Ontario operates in various cities across Ontario.
<https://bereavedfamilies.net>

Where can I find more CAMH resources about suicide?

- When a Family Member is Suicidal
www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-family-member-is-suicidal
- Hope and Healing after Suicide
www.camh.ca/hopeandhealing
- When a Parent Dies by Suicide... What Kids Want to Know
www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/when-a-parent-dies-by-suicide