

# Supporting children and young people after a suicide or homicide



**A suicide or homicide death is unusually difficult for everyone, especially children and young people who have loved or known the person who has died. They will experience grief in their own way. 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 love/aroha and good support, it can help the whole family or whānau.**

## What is different about this type of loss for children and young people?

Children and young people will always experience distress when someone close dies. However, after a suicide or homicide, the world around them can often feel especially frightening and unsafe. The death itself can be violent and disturbing to think about or imagine. People around them are likely to be in extreme distress. All kinds of official people and processes must happen, which disrupt normal life and add more stress.

If the death is a homicide, the loss is usually extraordinarily hard on children and young people. The funeral or tangihanga may be delayed. There may be a lot of media and community attention focused on the death and the immediate family. The offender may also be someone they know well, which can cause very conflicted feelings.

## Telling them the news

### Who should tell them

Telling a child or young person the sad news isn't easy. If possible, they need to hear it first from someone close to them, such as a parent, another close and familiar relative, or primary caregiver. This conversation can be hard, but it's a very important step in helping them through a traumatic situation.

## Don't wait too long

Instinctively we want to protect children and young people. However, it's very important to talk to them honestly. Doing this right from the start protects them from hearing the news insensitively from others. Secrets often get out and cause great harm.

Children and young people are observant and pick up on tension in the adults around them. They will know something's wrong. 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 go to in future.

## Prepare yourself first

If it would help, go over what you want to say by practising it aloud by yourself or with a trusted person first. Once we have heard ourselves say the words, it can make it easier.

## Find a good place to talk

Find a comfortable, safe, and private place where you won't be interrupted. Perhaps have some of the child or young person's favourite things nearby, especially for younger children. You could ask someone you and they trust to be there too.

When you get to your chosen space, turn mobile phones off. Take a few moments to settle yourself. Take some slow, deep breaths. Don't rush.

CONTACT

### Victim Support

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

  
Manaaki Tāngata  
Victim Support



## Some helpful things to do

- Start with a short, simple explanation of what happened in words they can understand. See the next section for some definitions and suggested words to explain what suicide and homicide mean.
- The most important information to share first is that the person has died. They're likely to ask you how. Telling them the person died by suicide or homicide, and explaining what that means, will help them better understand what's happened. Avoid sharing disturbing details they don't need to know, such as where and how the death happened.
- If you think they may have already heard the news, check what they know in case they have been told things that are untrue or confusing for them. Correct any details that aren't accurate.
- Give small pieces of information one at a time. There will be a lot for them to take in all at once.
- You might need to repeat information. Shock makes it hard to take information in and they may ask the same question more than once.
- Use non-judgmental language. Speak respectfully of the person who has died.
- They may ask questions, perhaps very blunt or random ones. Answer as best and as clearly as you can. Allow their questions to guide the conversation.
- If you don't know the answer to something they ask about, say so but let them know you'll tell them more when you can.



- Let them know they can talk with you further about what's happened whenever they need to.
- It's OK if you feel tearful. A child or young person can sense this is a serious, sad time. It helps them to know you're sharing the experience and they're not alone. 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.
- They might ask unrelated questions or start to do an activity to distract themselves. This may seem puzzling but is normal. They process things differently from adults and are just working through the news in their own way.
- They may blame themselves or feel guilty about what has happened. Reassure them that they did nothing to cause this death.
- Let them know what will happen next. The Police may need to do an investigation. Be kind and let them know they will be looked after and by whom, especially if they need to leave their home for a while.
- Wait for them to come back to you when they're ready to know or ask more. In the meantime, let them know they're safe, and be loving, kind, supportive, and caring.

## Finding the right words

How children and young people understand death will depend on the child or young person's age and stage in life. The following words are some suggested ideas but choose words that you feel are right to say and that suit the child or young person.

For younger children, a simple sentence or two can be enough until they come to you with any questions. You can start by saying something like, "Let's sit down together because I have some news to tell you about X. X has died." Then say simply and clearly what happened.

Don't use words and phrases like 'passed away', 'gone', 'was lost', or 'gone to sleep'. Children tend to be very literal, and these phrases can confuse them about what's happened. They may think the person will come back or wake up later.

Some words may need explaining:

- **Death:** When a person's body stops working and they can't be alive anymore. We won't be able to see them anymore.
- **Homicide or murder:** When a person ends someone else's life on purpose.
- **Suicide:** When a person does something to end their own life.
- **Grief or grieving:** Normal thoughts, feelings, and reactions we have after someone close to us has died that help us deal with what's happened.
- **Trauma or traumatic:** A sudden, frightening, and overwhelming thing that happens.

For older children and young people, a longer explanation will probably be needed. If you're breaking the news about a suicide, you can say something like, "I have some sad news to tell you about X. X has died. He/she/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's happened to X."

### Talking about suicide

There is still a stigma around suicide, which children and young people can pick up on. The words we use are important. Saying someone 'committed suicide' implies it was a crime when it wasn't and saying a suicide was 'successful' suggests it's something to be proud of. Avoid using these terms.

Instead of saying 'committed suicide', you could say they:

- 'died by suicide'
- 'took their own life'
- 'ended their own life'.

If appropriate for the child or young person, and if the person who died by suicide had been unwell with depression, you may like to talk about depression together. Go to [www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz) for useful resources and ways to talk about it. Remind them that it isn't anyone's fault that they get unwell, but it's important to do things that help us feel better and become well again, including asking others for help when we need it. Talk together about things that someone can do when they're not feeling good inside.

## Reassure them that what they're feeling is normal

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

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

You can remind the child or young person that everyone's life has a beginning and an end 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. We will always miss them and can always carry them in our hearts."

## 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 others. People can be curious and even pushy. Explain that they don't have to talk about it if they don't want to. Coming up with some things they'd feel OK to say and practising these with them can help build their confidence.

Talk about how to use social media safely, and how to respond to any unkind 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. ”**





## What to do next

### Be available, kind, and reliable

Do your best to provide a loving, supportive environment for them. This death will become part of their life story. Having adults they can trust and rely on around them will make them feel less uncertain, and the world a little safer. Draw on any comforting cultural or faith connections that are familiar and provide reassurance to them.

### Take care of their everyday needs

Having healthy food and plenty of water, getting exercise, and having enough sleep all help in stressful times, as well as time to play or be with friends.

### Keep up normal activities and routines

These can be reassuring in uncertain and distressing times. Knowing what to expect and what can be relied on can help their world feel safer.

### Offer them choices

What's happened can leave children and young people feeling powerless and that things around them are out of control. Giving them choices about everyday things can empower them and give them renewed confidence. It could be choices over small things, such as what to eat for lunch, what movie to watch, what to wear, whether they'd like to go to sports practice or kapa haka, or have friends round.

### Keep them informed

After a homicide, in particular, there can be many official processes and people involved for some time. There may be a lengthy investigation, a criminal case before court, media attention, and reactions from many people in their community, both from friends and strangers.

Explain who the people are and their roles. As the situation unfolds, keep them up to date with anything they need to know, such as when a court case might start or when sentencing is to happen. Use age-appropriate language.

Be as open with them as you can be. It's better that they get correct details from you and can ask questions and feel acknowledged when they hear things from others that worry or confuse them. Young people especially appreciate being informed and consulted.



### Help them remember the person

Ask about their positive memories, so they don't just focus on how the person died. Share stories, photos, make a scrapbook or memory box, give them a framed photo of the person, or plant a tree in their memory. Support any appropriate ideas they have to remember the person.

### Let them know that having a laugh and enjoying things is OK

This can help release stress that's inside and can distract them from some strong feelings.

### Before they go back to school

Ask them what they want to tell their teacher or their dean if at secondary school.

Tell their school what's happened. Talk with their teacher or dean. You may need to keep in contact with them to update them as needed.

Discuss what the child or young person can do if others ask questions they don't want to answer or if they say unkind things. It can help when they know their teacher or dean is there to help when things get tough and if they know what to say and do if others say or do hurtful or upsetting things.

### Check in with them regularly

Find moments to have a chat and spend time with them to see how they are doing. Children and young people often worry about different sorts of things and they'll often use their play to express what's inside. Look out for any concerning changes in mood or behaviour.





**Grief can be a long journey.**

### **What to do if you have concerns about them**

Trust your instincts if you feel they're struggling or behaviour changes are causing problems. Talk about these honestly with them, and don't let it build up. Seek out extra help and support from family, whānau, close friends, trusted elders, rangatira, or professionals. Speak with their teacher or dean, a nurse or doctor.

Your support worker can explain the support options available in your area.

### **Keep supporting them**

Grief and trauma reactions are likely to continue for some time. As they grow, children and young people can continue to re-experience or question what happened at different developmental stages and milestones.

Be especially supportive when it's an anniversary or special day, such as a birthday or Christmas. They may ask you to go over things as they work through it and what it means for their life.

You can't take their loss away but you can listen well, answer questions, reassure, encourage, and be there for them.

### **Get support for yourself too**

This is a really tough time for you and your whole family or whānau. Your wellbeing matters too, so be sure to look after yourself.

Find people who can help you as you support the child or young person or speak to your support worker about any concerns or questions. You don't have to do this alone.

## **Supporting a child or young person who has discovered or witnessed a death by suicide or homicide**

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

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 or be able to talk because they're in shock or very frightened. Just be with them quietly instead.

Let them know you know it was scary for them and they're safe now.

This is a very traumatic and overwhelming experience for them. They're likely to have some physical reactions, like feeling sick, headaches, stomach aches, being shaky, or having less appetite. Difficult memories may keep coming back. They might find it hard to sleep and could have bad dreams about what they saw. They may be more anxious than usual.

Some may regress in their development. This is normal and temporary but can be a surprise. Their confidence may be knocked back, they might become afraid of the dark again or not want to go to school. Toileting progress might go backwards or bedwetting may start, even in teenagers.

A Police detective may need to ask them what they witnessed. Police have strict procedures for interviewing children, so this would only be done with sensitivity and professional support.

Arrange for them to see a doctor, counsellor, or psychologist to help them deal with what happened. Ask your support worker about local trauma counselling support.

### **Keeping them safe from suicide in 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 hard times builds resilience. These all help to keep them safe.



## Other resources that may be useful

- Our brochures called *Coping with traumatic grief* and *Dealing with flashbacks* provide useful advice that may be helpful for children and young people, as well as you and other adults. We also have a brochure called *Supporting your child or young person after a crime or traumatic event* that goes into more detail about their likely reactions and how to support them. Your support worker can give you copies of these brochures or you can find them on our website at [www.victimsupport.org.nz](http://www.victimsupport.org.nz).
- Call or text 1737 to talk to a counsellor about any concerns and to find out about counselling services for children and young people in your area.
- Helplines for children and young people include:
  - What's Up: 0800 942 8787, 1 pm to 11 pm daily, professional counselling for children and teenagers up to 18 years old
  - Kidsline: 0800 543 754, 4 pm to 6 pm daily, kids up to 14 years old can talk with teenage volunteers supervised by adults
  - Youthline: 0800 376 633, free text 234, website: [www.youthline.co.nz](http://www.youthline.co.nz), confidential help and information for intermediate-aged kids and older
- For more information on the ways in which different ages may react, including babies and toddlers, go to <https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group>.
- Resources in a range of languages about how to talk to kids about trauma can be found at [www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about](http://www.kidshealth.org.nz/trauma-how-talk-your-kids-about).
- Information was developed following the Canterbury earthquakes in 2011. However, the advice remains relevant after any major traumatic event. Go to [www.education.govt.nz/school/health-safety-and-wellbeing/emergencies-and-traumatic-incidents/](http://www.education.govt.nz/school/health-safety-and-wellbeing/emergencies-and-traumatic-incidents/).
- The *Connecting Through Kōrero* guidebook and videos offer wise suggestions from the Mental Health Foundation for parents and other caring adults wanting to keep their children and young people safe and informed about suicide. Go to [www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/connecting-through-korero/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/connecting-through-korero/).



- *Conversations Matter – Telling a child about suicide* is an Australian resource available from [www.conversationsmatter.org.au/resources/telling-a-child-about-suicide](http://www.conversationsmatter.org.au/resources/telling-a-child-about-suicide).
- *Support after Suicide* provides resources for children, teens, parents, and caring adults at [www.shelleybrunskillmatson.com](http://www.shelleybrunskillmatson.com).
- Skylight provide support and resources for grieving children. You can contact Skylight on 0800 299 100 for children's books after a traumatic event or ask for them at your local library. Some useful books include:
  - *A Terrible Thing Happened* by Margaret Holmes
  - *After a Murder: A Workbook for Grieving Kids* by the Dougy Centre
  - *Something Has Happened* by Skylight
  - *When Tough Stuff Happens* by Skylight



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and confidential**







