

Considerations for combined primary and secondary schools following a suicide



Children, adolescents and adults all respond to death and express grief differently.

The response of children to a death by suicide will depend on their age, developmental stage, personality, connection to the deceased, intellectual development, cultural traditions, previous experiences of death and the emotional environment in which they live.

The age range of students and the subsequent different ways that they may express grief creates additional complexities and considerations for combined primary and secondary schools. Below is some information to assist with a safe response to a death by suicide in this setting.

Grief in younger children

Younger children tend to express grief through their behaviour and the way they interact with others. They may not talk about how they are feeling. They may also grieve in small doses and move in and out of grief.

Common, normal grief reactions include:

- Sadness
- Shock and disbelief
- Changes to sleeping patterns and/or appetite
- Anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died
- Anger
- Guilt

How grief might look in younger children in the school setting:

- Separation anxiety
- School refusal
- Fears
- Angry outbursts
- Regression in developmental milestones
- Changes in school performance
- Decreased social adjustment
- Unexplained physical symptoms

Children who have experienced other stressful situations or trauma in their lives, such as separation/divorce of parents, the death of a relative/pet or moving house/school, may find it harder to cope with the situation. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even if they had appeared to be coping. Children may also respond to the emotional changes in the adults around them.

Providing nurture and comfort, answering questions and keeping their routine as consistent as possible will help them manage during this difficult time.

Supporting bereaved siblings returning to school

Returning to school for bereaved siblings may be quite confronting and at times overwhelming. Consider what support the returning student may require, what information other students need to support them and importantly, how to manage conversations in the classroom or playground.

Staff will need to be guided by the family and the welfare team throughout this process.

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Managing conversations regarding the death

School staff have experience and expertise in talking appropriately to different age groups and should be guided by this; tailoring the information to the child's age and developmental stage. For younger children it might be appropriate to refer to the loss as a death rather than a suicide, but this may not always be possible.

Be mindful that parents may have specific ideas about what they want their children to know. Discussions with younger students about suicide should involve consultation with parents where appropriate.

Children tend to ask what they need to know.

Many children have been exposed to the concept of death through their experiences with pets, stories, television and other means, but misunderstanding and misinformation is common. You may need to ask what the child knows about death and help them understand that death is permanent and can't be changed; that it means the body stops working; and that it happens to everyone eventually.

Keep it simple and use words they will understand. You need only answer what they ask about at the time. On the other hand, they might ask a lot of questions or the same question over and over. Stay calm and answer in a consistent way.

Be honest if children ask about suicide.

Explain suicide in an age-appropriate way. Describe what happened in simple language. Do not talk about the method the person used to take their life.

Please refer to the **headspace** School Support *Suicide Postvention Toolkit – A Guide for Secondary Schools* for further guidance.

Acknowledgements

Conversations Matter fact sheet: *When telling a child about a suicide* (2013) www.conversationsmatter.com.au

Jesuit Social Services, Support After Suicide (2014) *Tell me what happened: talking with children and young people about suicide* <http://tellmewhathappened.rvrapid.com>

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You may need to explain why a person might take their own life. For example "People who die by suicide are often very sad and upset. They can get confused and can't find another way to solve their problems."

Avoid language that tries to make the younger student feel better, but which might accidentally make suicide seem positive, for example "He is in a better place now".

Make space for conversations to manage safety and risk

Everybody grieves differently. The grieving process can take months or years to resolve.

Children in particular may move in and out of grief. A period of worrying or out-of-character behaviour following a period of outward wellbeing may be part of their response to the suicide. Be prepared to make space for conversations about the suicide months or even years down the track.

Ensure conversations are safe for everybody.

Listen to students if they want to talk about the suicide, but this should be contained as per the **headspace** School Support fact sheet *Tips for teachers following a suicide*.

Consider the age and developmental stage of all students present to ensure conversations are safe for everyone. This is particularly important for classrooms with multiple year levels. Unnecessary details may be traumatising for younger children.

Conversations that become unsafe for younger children should be redirected to a private setting, such as the school counsellor.

Avoid language that criticises the deceased person or gives the impression that suicide was a positive outcome for the young person (glamorises suicide). **See fact sheets *How to talk about suicide with young people* and *Suicide contagion*.**

Help students to talk to others.

Explain to students that it is always best to talk to someone about how they are feeling and that there are always people they can go to who can help them with their worries.

Help them identify who they could share their worries with if they feel sad or upset.

Be aware of behaviours that may indicate a younger student is not coping.

Seek help from school well-being staff or appropriate local children's mental health services if:

- You are worried or unsure how to respond
- Students are experiencing overwhelming, severe and persistent grief symptoms
- Symptoms are getting worse.

Consider marginalised young people

When thinking about issues related to youth suicide it is very important to be aware of the unique needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI) young people and respond appropriately. Please see the **headspace** School Support website for more information.

For more information on suicide or support and assistance visit headspace.org.au/schoolsupport or headspace.org.au