

# What to Tell Children of a Loved One's Suicide?

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Often, adults agonize over what to tell young children when somebody in the child's family dies by suicide. The question becomes even more painful when the person who dies by suicide is the mother or father of a young child.

Some parents or other family members may want to lie to children about the cause of death. They want to protect children – protect them from blaming themselves and from asking the same devastating questions that plague adult survivors of suicide: *What could I have done differently? Why did they leave me? Why was I not a good enough reason to stay alive?*

Family members who cover up a suicide have good intentions, but their secrecy and deception can cause unintentional harm. By lying about suicide, adults invalidate children's reality, perpetuate the stigma of suicide, and leave children alone with a truth that they may discover elsewhere, like from other kids in the neighborhood.

For these reasons, and more, mental health professionals and many survivors of suicide themselves widely agree that children should be told the truth, no matter how sad and painful the truth is:



“With children, honesty about suicide is not only the best policy, it is the *only* policy. You must tell your children the truth in an age-appropriate manner from the beginning, *no matter how young they are*,” [according to Michael F. Myers, a psychiatrist, and Carla Fine](#), both of whom are survivors of suicide.

Children are exquisitely sensitive to their environments. In cases where adults withhold the truth, children may sense that they are being lied to, adding to feelings of betrayal and grief.

The important thing when talking to children about suicide is to tell the full truth. This means not just denying that suicide occurred. It also means giving the full context of why suicide occurs – because the person’s mind is sick or stressed and causes them to make sad, painful decisions that they would not otherwise make.

Suicide can seem like the ultimate, permanent abandonment for a child. Children need to understand that they did not cause the suicide. They also need to know that they could not have prevented it.

When Spalding Gray, an accomplished writer and performance artist, died by suicide, his wife told her children, "Suicide is an unhealthy state of mind versus a healthy state. That their father's suicide was not done to them, that he killed himself to end his feelings of pain, not to cause pain to them."

In another case, the father of young children struggled how to tell them that their mother had died by suicide. In a meeting with his therapist and his wife's family, the family told the children that their mom had died of a "brain attack":

"That is, the depression clouded her thinking and she was unable to see any other way to solve her problem, likening suicide to a heart attack in which one's heart fails to function properly."

Another important concern for children is to give them space to voice their reactions to the suicide – *all* of those reactions. Many times, children blame the suicide entirely on themselves. They may have said something mean to the person who died or even wished for the person to die. It is important to allow the child to talk freely about his or her feelings of self blame.



The child may feel very angry with the adult who died by suicide, and he or she needs to receive the message that such anger is not only acceptable, but also normal. Whatever feelings the child experiences, he or she needs to be heard.

That is the experts' advice in a nutshell: Children need to be told about a loved one's suicide, and they need to be heard, as well.