

**GRIEF FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS AFTER SUICIDE**

“Grief is a Form of Love”; the Center for Complicated Grief, <https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu>

The sudden loss of a student, peer, friend, sibling or relative to suicide can be devastating and traumatic. This is true for children and teens as much as for adults. Grieving after such a loss requires support in order to navigate a profoundly changed world. How profoundly one’s world is changed is a very individual experience, as is grief in general. Children and adolescents are generally more vulnerable to trauma than adults (National Action Alliance, 2015). And children grieve differently than adults. They tend to grieve sporadically reflecting their limited maturity (Requarth, 2006, p. 25). A teen will likely “experience reactions similar to those of adults, but will have fewer ways to cope” (Requarth, 2006, p. 56). The grief following a suicide does not end or go away. Rather, when dealt with successfully, it is transformed and integrated into the background of one’s life (Center for Complicated Grief).

**Needs of bereaved children and adolescents after a suicide (National Action Alliance, 2015)**

- Grief support that is appropriate to the child’s age and developmental level,
- Reassurance that someone will take care of their basic physical and emotional needs,
- Support for exploring feelings of responsibility and affirmation that they did not cause the death,
- Opportunities to tell the story of their loss in their own words,
- Help expressing negative thoughts and feelings,
- Ongoing support as their cognitive and linguistic development unfolds and their life experience evolves,
- Recognition that the experience and process of grief will be unique for each child,
- Effective professional assistance for grief complications.

When a student dies of suicide, schools face a particular challenge to identify and support those students who are deeply affected by their loss. Generally, loss to suicide causes shock, confusion or denial and questioning “why”; a roller coaster of emotions - anxiety, panic, numbness, helplessness, anger and guilt to name a few. Though this does not seem to be part of a school’s “mission to educate”, the disruption caused by such a loss and the possibility of the phenomenon of contagion (*see “Suicide Contagion and Clusters” in this Toolkit*) in teens is real and needs to be addressed by schools. Teens are “at increased risk to develop Major Depression, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and suicidal ideation following the suicide or suicide attempt of a peer”. Exposure to suicide can also increase the chance of experiencing complicated grief (Abbott & Zakriski, 2014, & Melhem et al., 2004). The “risk of suicide in adolescents following the death of a peer by suicide increases by two to four times higher than other age groups” (Abbott & Zakriski, 2014). Peers who were close to a student who died of suicide endorsed the belief that suicide is not preventable. Peers who were subject to repeated suicides (clusters) were more likely to believe suicide was normal (Abbott & Zakriski, 2014 & Brent et al., 1993). In addition, the stigma of suicide can make the grief process and bereavement harder for suicide loss survivors (Abbott & Zakriski, 2014). For all these reasons it is vital that schools provide support for grieving students after a suicide in their community. When youth are supported, they can eventually come to terms with their loss.

The **Postvention** section of this Toolkit goes into detail about how schools can respond and support students after a suicide death. Three guiding principles for the journey of grief after a suicide loss can be found in “After Suicide Loss; Coping with Your Grief “ (Jordan & Baugher, 2016, p. 2):

- You must take care of yourself. (see **Self-Care** section)
- You will learn to cope, but you cannot do this alone
- You will survive this

With these guiding principles in mind, schools can give their students the opportunity to have their grief acknowledged, be encouraged to express their feelings, and given hope that they will get better. “School provides children and teens with a sense of normalcy, reassuring them that life goes on, even in the face of tragedy” (Requarth, 2006, p. 117). It is also important to recognize teachers and staff are impacted by the loss of a student and need support as well. These principles apply to the entire school community.

The Dougy Center offers several tips for helping children and teens after experiencing a loss to suicide. The following are a few:

- Tell the truth. This allows youth to be open with their questions and concerns.
- Expect and allow for different emotions and feelings. This allows youth to feel safe and supported in exploring their feelings.
- Talk openly about suicide. This provides a safe place and/or person with whom youth can talk about their questions, concerns, and fears.
- Talk about and remember the person who died. This helps children share their thoughts and feelings as they work through their grief.
- Share information about depression and mental illness. This helps youth understand that the person who died was struggling with an illness that affected their thought processes and informs them that these illnesses are treatable.
- Be prepared for fears. This is an opportunity to listen to youths’ questions and concerns and to offer reassurance without making unrealistic promises.
- Provide outlets for grieving: play, physical activity, art, ect. This provides the opportunity for adults to reflect back what they see and hear validating a youth’s experience and helping them regain a sense of balance and control.
- Respect differences in grieving styles. Recognizing that each person will grieve in their own way helps clarify and affirm their individual way of grieving.

It is also important to note that grieving sometimes looks like depression. If a child or teen is truly depressed they will exhibit five or more symptoms of clinical depression which will be affecting their daily functioning. “If physical and emotional symptoms seriously impact daily functioning, they should be addressed by a qualified medical professional or counselor” (The Dougy Center).

## **Resources**

### **1. National Action Alliance (2015)**

#### **Bereaved Children**

- A Child in Grief — [bit.ly/achildgrief](http://bit.ly/achildgrief) — Comprehensive website, from New York Life
- Foundation Dougy Center — [bit.ly/dougygrief](http://bit.ly/dougygrief) — Resource page of the Dougy Center website
- When a Brother or Sister Dies — [bit.ly/siblingdies](http://bit.ly/siblingdies) — Brochure for those who have experienced the death of a sibling by any means, from The Compassionate Friends
- When Families Grieve — [bit.ly/familiesgrief](http://bit.ly/familiesgrief) — Lots of resources in various formats for bereaved families and children, from Sesame Street (access downloads at [bit.ly/kidsgriefresources](http://bit.ly/kidsgriefresources))
- Children, Teens and Suicide Loss, Dougy Center, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention  
<https://afsp.org/wp-content/flipbooks/childrenteenssuicideloss/?page=1>

#### **Guardians/Caregivers**

- After a Suicide Death: Ten Tips for Helping Children & Teens — [bit.ly/tipshelping](http://bit.ly/tipshelping) — Brochure, from the Dougy Center

- Child Survivors of Suicide: A Guidebook — [bit.ly/childsurvive](http://bit.ly/childsurvive) — Comprehensive guidance on helping children bereaved by suicide, by Rebecca Parkin and Karen Dunne-Maxim (Spanish version: [bit.ly/childsurvive-sp](http://bit.ly/childsurvive-sp))
- Helping Children Cope — [bit.ly/helpcope](http://bit.ly/helpcope) — Concise overview of helping suicide bereaved children, including activities, from a presentation at a VA medical center
- “Talking to Your Child about Suicide” — [bit.ly/childabout](http://bit.ly/childabout) — Brief article, from the NAMI New Hampshire loss survivor packet
- Understanding Suicide, Supporting Children — [bit.ly/kidsupport](http://bit.ly/kidsupport) — In-depth video on the point of view and needs of children bereaved by suicide, from the Dougy Center
- When a Child’s Friend Dies by Suicide — [bit.ly/childfrienddies](http://bit.ly/childfrienddies) — Tips for parents and caregivers, from Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide

### Trauma and Grief in General

- National Alliance for Grieving Children — [bit.ly/childalliance](http://bit.ly/childalliance) — Resource page of the website
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network — [bit.ly/childgrieftrauma](http://bit.ly/childgrieftrauma) — Links and information about children affected by trauma
- NCTSN Caregiver Quick Tips — [bit.ly/nctsnstips](http://bit.ly/nctsnstips) — Brief, authoritative handouts for helping young children, school-age children, and teens
- NCTSN Advice for Educators — [bit.ly/adviceeducators](http://bit.ly/adviceeducators) — Handout to help educators in the aftermath of trauma affecting school populations

### Books on Grief After Suicide

For Children and Their Caregivers

- After a Parent’s Suicide: Helping Children Heal. Requarth, M. (2008). Healing Hearts Press.
- After a Suicide Death: An Activity Book for Grieving Kids. (2001). The Dougy Center.
- But I Didn’t Say Goodbye: Helping Children and Families after a Suicide. Rubel, B. (2000). Griefwork Center.
- Red Chocolate Elephants: For Children Bereaved by Suicide (includes DVD). Sands, D. (2010). Karridale Pty Ltd.
- Someone I Love Died by Suicide: A Story for Child Survivors and Those Who Care for Them. Cammarata, D.T. (2009). Limitless Press.

### 2, Dougy Center

Children, Teens and Suicide Loss. (2017) Flip Book, Retrieved from <https://afsp.org/wp-content/flipbooks/childrenteenssuicideloss/?page=1>

For more resources see *The Dougy Center* website at <http://www.dougy.org>

For a definition of Complicated Grief see <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/complicated-grief/basics/definition/con-20032765>