

PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND SUICIDE

Explaining a death by suicide to children is a difficult yet necessary task for adults. The alternative of withholding information and *not* telling children can cause harm over time. Children pick up on the intensity of emotions even without any explanations. If adults avoid details or replace one story with another, children will soon learn not to ask the questions. Thoughts and feelings become internalized and anxiety can increase.

How much detail to share depends upon the age and the personality of the child. Explanations must include the fact that suicide is a permanent solution to a problem that may not seem – but truly is – temporary. People who contemplate suicide can feel so overwhelmed that they do not realize that there are *always* other options. Children need to be told that it was a permanent decision and help is always available even when they don't *think* it is.

The younger the child, the more basic the explanation needs to be. Simple facts should be addressed. Speak plainly and directly about the loss. For example: "When a person dies, the body doesn't work anymore. It does not breathe, sleep or eat." Observe how the child receives the information. Convey your willingness to clarify any questions or confusion. If you provide the opportunity for your child to talk and ask questions, you may be surprised. For many children, this may initially be all they need.

With this topic, one can only absorb so much information at a time. There may actually be less discussion than you anticipate after providing the initial information. However, know that if you convey the willingness to talk, questions will arise at other times. This type of loss can complicate the grief process. It may help to seek some additional resources in the community. Call a Pathways Center for Grief & Loss bereavement counselor to learn more about the support options available to you.

Suggested ways to help children cope:

- ◆ Read books together that address grief and loss issues
- ◆ Talk openly about the death
- ◆ Make a collage of pictures
- ◆ Create a journal of memories
- ◆ Start a diary to record feelings related to the loss
- ◆ Find ways to commemorate the person who died
- ◆ Specify a regular time each day to talk with your child
- ◆ Emphasize that suicide is a mistake because there are always other choices
- ◆ Remember the life, not just the death