

Suicide Response Resources

Responding to a death that can't be referred to as a suicide

Schools are sometimes unable to refer to a death as 'suicide'. It's important to respect coronial processes and the wishes of the family, while also responding effectively to the needs of your school community.

The reasons why schools are unable to refer to a death as suicide are many.

Perhaps the school is unsure about police and coronial processes and using the word 'suicide' before an investigation is complete. Or the family may not want their young person's death to be referred to as a suicide. There are many reasons why families may make this decision. They may feel worried about the stigma associated with suicide or feel guilty, ashamed or fearful of blame. Religious or cultural reasons may also guide this decision.

Responding to a death that can't be referred to as suicide is a complex situation and schools are encouraged to seek advice from additional experts and supports.

The importance of language and the word 'suicide'

The way a death is reported and the language a school uses to describe it is influenced by various factors.

These include:

- police and legal processes
- the school's duty of care to students
- the bereaved family's wishes.

A school's choice of language can influence whether a suicide is glamorised or stigmatised. It can also affect the grief and help-seeking behaviour of those who are adversely affected.

Research shows that vulnerable young people and school communities are best supported by using clear and accurate information about suicide, mental illness, coping strategies and help-seeking. While every suicide is unique and should be responded to as such school staff are encouraged, wherever possible, to use phrases such as 'suspected suicide' or 'possible suicide' when referring to a suicide. This will minimise stigma, glamourisation, myth and rumour. It also promotes support-seeking for those affected or otherwise at risk.

Alternatively, schools may refer to a death as a 'sudden death' or 'unexpected death' when:

- the cause of death is genuinely not clear
- the school has not been able to make contact with the family
- the family doesn't want the death to be referred to as a suicide.

Confirming with the family how to refer to a death

The first step is to determine whether the death can be referred to as a suicide and seek permission from the family to do so.

If the family asks you for advice, highlight the importance of being able to talk to young people about suicide and its causes, and how this can keep them safe. Ultimately, if the family decides they don't want the death referred to as a suicide, you'll need to respect their wishes.

Referring to a death as a suicide without the family's consent can have an adverse effect on the grief of the bereaved and others affected. It also poses a possible litigation risk for the school.

It's important to:

- carefully consider confidentiality and who to inform that the death was a suicide. [In some cases, you may only decide to inform the school leadership and Emergency Response Team (ERT)]
- update the school community as more information becomes available, if appropriate to do so (for example, if the family decides to refer to the death as a suicide after initially refusing to do so)
- ensure that staff know they can always get advice before proceeding with a course of action (for example, by consulting with their education body or mental health experts)
- ensure staff understand the limitations of this complex situation and that they can ask the leadership team or wellbeing staff questions and discuss difficult experiences.

Discussing suicide as a general topic

If family permission isn't granted, school communities may find it difficult to raise the subject of suicide.

However, discussing suicide in general terms is perfectly appropriate and does not breach confidentiality. While schools need to avoid confirming whether a particular student died by suicide, they're free to conduct general conversations about suicide, especially if there's speculation among young people in the school community.

How to communicate

After a suicide, the school community must communicate information clearly and consistently to support vulnerable young people.

It's not uncommon for a young person or family to want to know personal information about another person that's not appropriate to share. The response you give will depend on your assessment of the situation.

It might be enough to tell them that the person died suddenly or unexpectedly. Or you might say that the family has chosen to keep the details of the young person's death private and that the school will respect their wishes.

Sometimes a more detailed response may be required, especially if the person is distressed and seeking answers. In these cases, you could talk about suicide in general and move the conversation away from specific details. Instead, focus on how the young person is feeling or coping.



Group conversations when young people are talking about a death as a suicide.

You might like to say:

"We've heard students wondering about whether [student's name] died by suicide. Their family have chosen to keep how they died private and the school will be respecting their wishes regarding this. We ask you to respect their wishes, too. But given the subject has come up, there is some important information about suicide that we would like to discuss."

This opens the door to discuss mental health issues, grief reactions and help-seeking. These conversations will help to reduce stigma and encourage young people to seek support for themselves or a peer while respecting the family's decision.



Individual conversations when a young person or family asks if a student died by suicide.

You might like to say:

"I understand that you want to make sense of how [student's name] died, and it's normal to want to know and understand, but the family have chosen to keep how s/he died private and the school will be respecting their wishes regarding this. It's OK to be upset now, and I want to help you as best I can. It would be a good idea to go and see the school counsellor and to get some support from them."

Wellbeing staff can then support the young person or family's responses and feelings in a safe and confidential space. Bear in mind that wellbeing staff can discuss the feelings, beliefs and responses without breaching confidentiality.

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