

Suicide Response Resources

Section A: Immediate Response

Action Checklist

The list below outlines the key actions that schools can undertake to respond to and recover from a death by suicide. Further detail about these actions is provided throughout the toolkit.

Section A: Immediate response

- ☐ Contact relevant mental health services for support.
- ☐ If the incident happened at school, ensure the immediate safety of staff and young people — for example, provide first aid and call an ambulance and the police. Ensure the scene is secure and any witnesses moved to an area for support.
- ☐ If the incident happened away from school, find out as many of the facts as possible. Investigate rumours immediately. Confirm facts with the family or police.
- ☐ Ensure those affected — young people, family and staff — are not left alone. Contact the families of young people and staff.
- ☐ Inform the relevant representative at your state or territory education department or equivalent body.
- ☐ Contact your Be You Consultant for support and guidance as required.
- ☐ Contact the bereaved family. Ask how to refer to the death when informing the school community. If the family agree, use the term 'suicide'.

Steps to follow

Look after your own wellbeing

Managing a postvention plan can be stressful and tiring.

It's important to look after your mental health during this emergency phase. Take time to breathe, consider the priorities for action and make decisions with other members of the ERT. No-one should carry the responsibility for decisions by themselves.

If the suicide has happened at school

Ensure the immediate safety of all school staff and students:

- Administer first aid when necessary.
- Call 000 for emergency services.
- Alert the Emergency Response Team (ERT).

Isolate the site of the suicide

For the safety of staff and students, limit access to the site of the suicide:

- Limit access to the site by students and unauthorised staff with screens, by blocking corridors and using evacuation procedures.
- Don't remove items or disturb the area, which police will need to examine.
- Do everything possible to protect others from viewing the site.
- Follow your school's emergency and critical incident management protocols as appropriate.

Support witnesses

If any students witnessed the death, a nominated ERT member should:

- move them to a safe location
- arrange for them to be supervised and supported by a member of staff
- contact their family and inform them of the situation
- liaise with police regarding statements or other required actions
- give the young person the option of being collected by their family
- offer them support from a mental health professional.

If any staff members witnessed the death, the ERT member should:

- move them to a safe location
- arrange for them to be supported by another member of staff and a mental health professional if required
- liaise with police regarding statements or other required actions
- offer them relief from their duties for the day and check what support is available to them outside the school.

If the incident happened away from school

Take the time to confirm the death and establish the facts:

- Don't ignore rumours, notes, emails or messages about suicide from young people, families or staff. Follow these up immediately.
- Verify reports of suicide that don't come from immediate family members through the police, hospital staff or, with sensitivity, the family.
- If information is determined to be incorrect then provide accurate information to contain and dispel rumours.

Ensure that affected young people and staff aren't left alone

Providing support and assistance is key.

Anyone immediately affected by a suicide death should be supported in a safe and secure place until family members arrive to support them. Note that family members may need assistance to know how to support the affected person. Provide them with resources and contact details for support services.

Inform the relevant education department or governing body

Seek support and consultation from your education department or governing body.

- Contact the Be You team who can provide onsite, phone or email support and guidance for your school.
- Contact details for each state and territory team can be found here.

Liaise with the bereaved family

Contact with the family is the responsibility of one staff member only.

This role requires sensitivity and compassion, given the grief the family is experiencing.

Consider who's best placed to undertake this in light of their relationship with the family, the degree to which they're impacted by the death and how comfortable they are to take on this role. This role is usually undertaken by the principal or a senior staff member who doesn't have a personal relationship with the bereaved family. Holding both a personal role and the school liaison role can prove difficult and, in some circumstances, can compromise the professional liaising that needs to occur. It can also negatively impact the staff member's grieving process.

There may be great variation in the accessibility of the family and their capacity and willingness to communicate. This may be influenced by the family's pre-existing relationship with the school, cultural or religious practices regarding death and suicide, and whether there are siblings attending the school. In some circumstances, the family may ask (or you could request, if they're too distressed to talk) an extended family member to liaise with the school on their behalf.

This early liaison with the family is important to:

- offer the condolences of the school
- offer support and liaison with the school, including providing information about the school's postvention plan
- provide contact details for external support services
- ascertain if the school community can be informed and if the death can be referred to as a suicide.

It's also important to request permission to recontact the family over the coming days.

This contact may:

- alert them of potential or scheduled media contact
- determine details about the funeral or memorial service and their wishes regarding the school's representation at it
- discuss and arrange support for siblings attending the school.

Other things to consider during the immediate response

Using the word 'suicide'

If the family has confirmed that the young person has died, it's important for legal and ethical reasons to seek their permission to refer to the death as a suicide. Even if they're using the word suicide, you can't assume that they're providing permission for this information to be shared with the school community.

Some families will not wish for the death to be referred to as a suicide at all, or they might acknowledge the death was by suicide to the ERT but not wish for it to be communicated that way to the broader school community. They may request the use of language like 'sad and tragic death' or 'sudden death'.

If the family asks for advice, it's appropriate to talk about the benefits of being able to discuss suicide openly. You can share that research shows that vulnerable young people and school communities are best supported by using clear and accurate information about suicide, mental health conditions, coping strategies and help-seeking, and that being able to talk openly about suicide can help staff and families to support young people impacted by the death.







Who determines a death is a suicide?

Deaths by suicide, like all sudden or unexpected deaths, are reported to the coroner.

The coroner determines that a death is suicide. Their investigations may take time and the bereaved family may choose to refer to the death as suicide prior to formal determination by the coroner.

With permission from the bereaved family, you can communicate to the school community using language such as 'circumstances of the death indicate suicide' or 'suspected suicide'.

Be You Fact Sheets: immediate Response

-  Grief: how young people respond to a suicide
-  Staff grief after suicide
-  Family liaison, funerals and memorial after a suicide
-  Responding to a death that can't be referred to as suicide
-  Supporting young people after a suicide
-  Boarding schools: what to do after a suicide

How to refer to the cause of death?

The family's wishes regarding how to refer to the death must be respected.

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

However, the language you use is important. It can affect the grief and help-seeking behaviour of those impacted by the death. Wherever possible, it's recommended that you allow for appropriate conversations about suicide as a general topic, particularly if there's speculation among young people about suicide.

This is a very complex situation and there are some important points to note:

- Carefully consider confidentiality and who's informed that the death was a suicide. This may be the ERT only.
- While it can feel uncomfortable to talk about suicide at all without permission, discussing suicide as a general topic is OK and doesn't breach confidentiality. However, you need to avoid confirming whether the young person in question died by suicide.
- For group conversations, you could say, "We have heard young people wondering about whether [student's name] died by suicide. Their family have chosen to keep how they died private and we will be respecting their wishes. We ask you to respect their wishes, too. But given the subject has come up, there's some important information about suicide we'd like to discuss."
- For individual conversations where a student or family member asks directly if the death was by suicide, your response will depend upon your assessment of the situation. It might be enough to simply respond that the person died suddenly or unexpectedly. You might gently contain questioning by reiterating that the family has chosen to keep how the young person died private and the school is respecting their wishes.
- Sometimes a more-detailed response will be required, especially if the person asking is distressed. Keep talking generally about suicide and move the conversation away from specific details. Instead, focus on how the young person is feeling or coping. For example, say "I understand 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 they died private and we will be respecting their wishes. It's OK to be upset now, and I want to help you as best I can. It would be a good idea to talk to [school wellbeing staff] and to get some more support from them. What do you think?"
- Wellbeing staff can then support the young person's responses and feelings to suspecting or believing that the person died by suicide in a safe and confidential space. Please note: wellbeing staff can discuss the young person's belief that the person died by suicide without breaching confidentiality.
- Ensure staff understand that they can and should bring difficult experiences to the ERT or seek advice before proceeding with a course of action.
- You can update the school community as more information becomes available (for example, if the family decides to refer to the death as a suicide after initially choosing not to).
- You can seek further information and support from a Be You team.

The impact of suicide on boarding schools

The impact of a death by suicide can be greatly extended in the boarding school setting due to the multiple communities existing within or connected to the school (for instance, those communities where the students might live outside of school terms).

To ensure a comprehensive response to a death by suicide in boarding schools, there are four key areas to address:

- communication between teaching and boarding staff
- supporting boarding students' mental health
- managing the multiple communities making up the school community
- managing risk for all students.

The capacity and ability for boarding staff to provide support to students, particularly after school hours, and the impact of the suicide death on them personally, should also be considered when planning supports for this group.

Death in school holidays

A death by suicide during the school holidays presents additional challenges.

You might like to consider:

- whether you should respond during the holidays and if this should be done in conjunction with your education department or school's governing body
- whether external services may be more appropriate to respond during school holidays
- facilitating an ERT meeting if possible.

If you decide to respond during the school holidays:

- ensure you work collaboratively with external services who can provide support to young people
- where possible, the same postvention tasks should occur during the school holidays
- contact families to inform them of the death, and outline help-seeking options available for young people and families via your usual communication process. In this communication, it's important to ask families to inform their young person.
- contact by phone the families of those most impacted or at risk directly
- decide on the process for responding to families contacting the school at this time. For example, will a nominated staff member be checking the school phone and responding to enquiries regularly or intermittently? Ensure families are informed of the school's availability and provide external support contact details. This information may be communicated via the school's website or social media accounts.

Combined primary and secondary schools

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

Children and young people's responses to a death by suicide will depend on their age, developmental stage and personality, connection to the deceased, cognitive capacity, cultural traditions, previous experiences of death, the environment in which they live and the presence of any pre-existing emotional difficulties.

The age range of students and the subsequent different ways they process loss and express grief creates additional complexities and considerations for combined primary and secondary schools. Though details about suicide won't usually be given to primary school-aged students, sometimes children will have this information (for example, they may have heard about it from older siblings or heard about it after information is shared with families). Seek advice from your leadership team on how to manage this.

School staff have experience and expertise talking appropriately to different age groups and should be guided by this, tailoring the information to the child's age and developmental stage.

Consider the following:

- Children at various ages and stages of development will have different understandings of what death means and this will need to be considered when providing information. Regardless of how much the information is filtered, it needs to be accurate and consistent. Avoid talking about the death in terms of fairy tales or myths.
- Ideally, the family informs the child about the death. Provide guidance and resources to support families.
- Be prepared for children to ask questions and talk about how they're feeling. It's important that children feel comfortable talking to trusted adults about their worries and uncertainties. Talk in general terms about feelings, focusing on experiences of loss when people or pets have died rather than the specifics of the recent death. This might be difficult as children can be very curious about what has occurred. Share what other people find helpful when they're feeling sad. This will help avoid more-complex discussions about suicide. Encourage children to share concerns with their families.
- Children are less likely to articulate their grief in words. Observe and follow up any behavioural or mood changes, and encourage families to do the same.

- You can access and refer to information about grief in younger children and how to talk about death with children (for example, the [Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement](#) has fact sheets about grief and talking about death with children).
- In consultation with the bereaved family, support any bereaved siblings (and significant family members) to return to school.
- If classroom conversations occur, ensure they're safe for all children. Interrupt and redirect conversations when necessary. Conversations that become unsafe for younger children should be redirected to an individual setting, such as with the school counsellor.
- Seek consultation from external services as needed, such as the Be You team, your local child and adolescent mental health services or the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.