

# Suicide in schools: Information for families

## Suicide Response Resources

Exposure to suicide can be a traumatic experience. It can have a profound emotional effect not only on family and friends, but on students, school staff, families and the whole community.

Here's some information that may help you as a parent or caregiver to support a young person during this difficult time. This fact sheet is not intended to be given directly to young people.

## How young people respond to suicide

How a young person responds to a suicide is influenced by their age, developmental stage, personality, relationship with the deceased person and what's happening in their life.

There isn't a standard response to suicide but there are a range of normal grief-related reactions that young people may experience.

These include:

- shock, disbelief, confusion or numbness
- guilt or blame
- sadness and feelings of betrayal or abandonment

- experiencing anxiety, fears or nightmares
- preoccupation with thoughts of the person who has died, and trying to make sense of the death and understand why it happened
- withdrawal from others
- irritability, anger or aggression
- difficulty concentrating
- changes to sleep patterns, appetite, energy and enjoyment of usual activities.

Young people need to find safe ways to express their feelings, whatever their age. Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Sometimes, it can be difficult for adults to understand the fluidity of a young person's grief. Young people can move quickly in and out of their grief, which can be different to how adults typically grieve. Be guided by the young person's need to talk and make it clear that you will be available whenever they need you.

Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives may find it harder to cope.

It can be more challenging for children who have experienced other stressful situations or trauma in their lives, like separation or parental divorce,

the death of a relative or pet, moving house or school to cope with suicide. The death may trigger difficult feelings about these events and make coping with the death itself more difficult.

If a young person is already using the services of a psychologist or psychiatrist, inform them of the suicide.

Some reactions can happen weeks, months or a year after the suicide.

If you're concerned about your child or young person's reaction and behaviour – such as changes in their socialising or schoolwork – it's important to speak to the principal, a student counsellor or a general practitioner (GP). This may result in a referral to a counsellor for a mental health or risk assessment.

## What young people need to know

The school will provide students with information about the incident, but young people may want to know exactly what happened.

Details about the way a suicide occurred will not be given to young people as this information is potentially harmful to their wellbeing. As family members, it's important to steer discussion towards positive help-seeking actions that young people can take when they're struggling. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend.

## Asking for help

Encouraging young people to ask for help is important in any discussion about suicide.

Young people sometimes share their feelings about death with friends – in conversations, letters, emails, text messages and online. If they suspect a friend may be about to hurt themselves, they should tell an adult at once.

## Responding to community concern with respect

Suicide can have a profound emotional effect not only on family and friends, but on the whole community.

When you speak with other members of the community:

- respect the bereaved family by avoiding engaging in gossip or speculation
- take care not to give the impression that suicide was a positive outcome for the young person
- encourage help-seeking behaviours in young people.

## What to do about media coverage

Research has shown the way suicide is reported in the media is important. Some types of media coverage can increase the risk of suicide in vulnerable people.

You may decide to protect your family against some media coverage, or you may choose to watch the news together. By watching the news together, you can discuss any concerns and ensure everyone feels supported.

Journalists may approach family members for comment after a youth suicide, even if you don't have any connection to the young person who died. It's best to direct any media enquiries to the school's media spokesperson. If you're unsure who the spokesperson might be, direct the journalist back to the school for comment.

## Understand that school staff will also be affected

While everyone will be working towards returning school routines to normal, consider that some staff will be managing difficult emotions.

### Be aware of social media activity

After a suicide, young people are likely to turn to social media for a variety of purposes.

They might send news about the death (accurate and rumoured), post messages (appropriate and inappropriate), call for impromptu gatherings and create virtual memorials.

It's important to talk with your young person about social media activity and how it might affect them. Talk to them about how to manage this and negotiate boundaries around their use of social media if necessary.

It's best to monitor your young person's use of social media for inappropriate or concerning comments about the suicide. These may include:

- bullying or trolling
- graphic depictions or images of suicide
- discussing methods or plans of suicide
- statements encouraging people to take their own life
- statements placing blame on others
- suicide or goodbye notes.

If you're concerned about messages you see or hear about on social media, let someone know. This could be school staff, local authorities or emergency services.

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## For more information and support

The Beyond Blue Support Service provides support any time of the day or night. To talk with a trained mental health professional, please call 1300 22 4636.

[headspace](#) centres provide support, information and advice to young people aged 12 to 25

[Kids Helpline](#) is a 24-hour telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25: 1800 55 1800

[Lifeline](#) is a 24-hour telephone counselling service: 13 11 14

[Suicide Call Back Service](#) is a 24-hour service that provides telephone, video and online counselling: 1300 659 467

[13Yarn](#) is a 24-hour dedicated support service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: 13 92 76

Your general practitioner (GP)

A psychologist or counsellor (your GP can refer you).

For more information on communicating safely online about suicide, you can visit Orygen's [#chatsafe website](#).