



Luton



Milton Keynes
City Council

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improve the health
and wellbeing of our
communities

Supporting your child after the suicide of a parent or carer

*A guide for families in
Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes*

Luna guides:
Families in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes



teamluna.org

Losing a parent or caregiver to suicide is different to other types of death. Children and young people often blame themselves and may experience feelings of shame, guilt, anger and abandonment.

Without the right support, these feelings can lead to low self-esteem, poor mental health and risk-taking behaviour. This leaflet will help you to find the right specialist services and resources for you and your family.

Suicide can have a devastating impact on the whole family. You are likely to have complicated feelings, including your own grief, to manage. It may feel difficult to carry out even basic tasks, let alone to give your child the support they need.

If you are struggling to support your child, or need to talk to someone yourself, please reach out. There is help available. We have included a list of local and national support organisations at the end of this leaflet.

If Dad's suicide been addressed appropriately and I had received thoughtfulness, care and compassion, I am sure I would not suffer with the severe mental ill health I (and my wife and children) now have to cope with as an adult.

Steve - Luna Lived Experience Network

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Growing up, losing a parent to suicide, I spent so much time hiding what I thought was a dirty secret from my peers, I think now as an adult what else could that energy have been spent on had the support I received growing up helped me to realise this was not the case?

Hannah - Luna Lived Experience Network

Telling your child what has happened

Telling your child that their parent or caregiver has taken their own life might feel almost impossible. You may worry that they are too young or that hearing about suicide could prompt them to harm themselves. The right words may feel out of reach. You might think a professional would do a better job.

Children, even very young ones, cope better when they are told the truth by someone they love and trust in a familiar environment.

There is no evidence to suggest that talking to young people about suicide increases their risk of self-harm or suicide. It's important to give your child space to share how they feel over time and express their complicated grief in a place that feels safe.

Talking openly about the suicide and the person who died will help them feel comfortable asking questions and sharing their feelings over time. It will also help them access the right specialist support.

Age-appropriate honesty with your child avoids the risk of them overhearing information and losing trust in you. It prevents them feeling confused by ambiguous information. It will also mean they are more likely to ask questions to make sense of what has happened.

It's never too late to tell the truth, even if you didn't at the time.

Professionals and specialist bereavement charities can help you find the words to talk to your child.



Pages 13-15 have a list of support organisations and age-appropriate resources to support children and their families

'I was told my dad died of a brain tumour. This made me think this was hereditary and that I might get one. It eroded my trust in what my mother tells me.'

Simon - Luna Lived Experience Network



Tips for talking to your child about suicide and bereavement

Research supports providing an honest, age-appropriate explanation about the death, rather than ambiguous half-truths. When children are given the incorrect information it's like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces and this can add to their confusion and distress.

Dr Diane Sands, Director of Bereaved by Suicide Centre for Intense Grief, Sydney

- Use age-appropriate, straightforward language. Children need to understand that death is irreversible. It's important to say clearly that the person has died, or that their body has stopped working.
- Simple details your child can picture will help them make sense of what happened. It will also give them the words to talk about it to others when they need to.

For example, 'Dad died in his car. He drank some chemicals that stopped his body working. The doctors tried to help him but he had already died.' For more examples of possible phrases, see pages 8 and 9.
- It's better to say that the person 'died by suicide' or 'took their own life'. 'Commit' is usually associated with crimes and sins and can make the stigma around suicide worse.
- Give your child enough information to help them understand but don't go into lots of extra detail immediately. As your child processes the information (and as their understanding grows with age) they may have more questions. You may have to repeat information many times.
- Don't describe suicide as a choice. This can reinforce feelings of rejection and abandonment. The 'choice' to die by suicide is not a choice in the way we normally understand the word. For someone in a suicidal state it can feel like their only option.
- Reassure your child they are loved, nothing is their fault and everyone is there to provide support. Continue to offer this reassurance regularly.
- Avoid comments that encourage them to become an adult too soon. Phrases like, 'You are going to have to look after me now' add a level of responsibility that your child should not have to cope with. It may also encourage them to hide their own feelings rather than seeking the help they need.

i We have some examples of helpful phrases on page 8.

- Give your child the opportunity to ask questions and answer them truthfully as they arise.
- It's okay to say 'I/we don't know' if this is the case.
- Ask open questions and avoid making assumptions. For example, 'How are you feeling?' rather than, 'You must be so sad'. Remember young children may not be able to identify their emotions easily.
- Acknowledge emotions without trying to 'solve' them. Sometimes we can't fix things and being there alongside someone is the best way to help them through.
- Try and make sure your child is getting consistent information from other adults they talk to.
- Be accepting of all emotions. Your child might feel ambivalence, guilt, relief, shame anger and/or regret as well as (or instead of) sadness and loss. Reassure them that however they feel is okay and understandable.
- It might help to share something of your own complex feelings too - 'I'm feeling really sad he has died but also a bit angry and hurt he couldn't talk to me. I know these feelings are really normal to have and it doesn't mean I don't love your dad'.
- Sometimes it can be easier to have difficult conversations when you are walking side by side or involved in a craft activity. This may not be right for your first conversation but you might find it helps further down the line.

The people who were most patient, non-judgemental and compassionate, were the most helpful. They would be there if I wanted to talk about it and there if I didn't too.

Abbie - Luna Lived Experience Network

i What you say to your child can stay with them for a lifetime, so even if you feel angry or let down, don't judge the person who has died with comments that, for example, imply they were selfish. Talk about them with compassion as someone your child loves deeply.

Helpful phrases

Children and young people of different ages will need different levels of information and explanation. It is not always easy to find the right words. You may find some of these phrases, or parts of them, helpful. You can adapt them to fit your situation and child.

Responding to feelings and finding support

'It's so understandable you feel that way.'

'This is not your fault at all. Mum/dad loved you very much and we are all here for you.'

'Sometimes children whose parents have made themselves die feel that it is their fault, but this is wrong. It's never ever the child's fault.'

'You might feel as if you are the only one going through this but there are lots of other people going through the same thing. Although it might feel like you, you are not alone.'

'There are places that help people after their mum/dad has died by suicide. Would you like me to organise for you to talk to someone there, or to write them a letter/email?'

'Even if I seem upset when we talk, that doesn't mean we have to stop. Sometimes letting your emotions and feelings out together is a good thing and can help a little bit.'

Explaining the facts and answering questions

'We don't know exactly how he died, but I will tell you more as soon as I find out.'

'He took too many tablets on purpose and they stopped his heart working.'

'She died because she put something tight round her neck.'

'You can ask me questions whenever you like.'

Explaining what suicide means

'When someone does something that stops their body from working and makes them die, this is called suicide. It is sometimes also called 'taking their own life' or 'ending their own life'.'

i For more information on specialist local services see page 13.

Explaining why

'Mum's brain wasn't working in the way it should. She thought that things would be better if she died. This isn't true but she was very confused and thought it was.'

'Dad had lots of problems for a long time deep down inside him and he thought he couldn't solve them. They made him feel really bad and he thought the only way to stop feeling bad was to end his life.'

'Sometimes a person gets ill in their head, and this changes the way they think. The illness made mum think we would be happier without her.'

'We don't know exactly why dad decided to take his own life. His brain might not have been working properly so he couldn't remember all the good things in his life.'

'Nothing you did or said made mum/dad do this. They loved you very much.'

Supporting your child now and in the future

Children need reassurance that they are loved and nothing they did caused the death. They may worry that something else bad is going to happen and need reassurance that the world is good, safe and controllable.

Dr Diane Sands, Director of Bereaved by Suicide Centre for Intense Grief, Sydney

Remember children express grief differently

Children express their grief in different ways at different times. It's normal for a child to cry one moment and then happily play with friends the next. This is sometimes called 'puddle-jumping'. It prevents them from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings. A lack of tears or outward signs of grief does not mean they are not affected now or in the long term.

Give them a chance to say goodbye

It's usually helpful for children to attend a funeral or memorial ceremony if they want to. It is an opportunity to remember and honour the person who has died, and a final chance to say goodbye to their physical body. If children are left out, they miss an opportunity to hear they were loved and process their grief. They may also find it much harder to come to terms with as they get older.

Explain what will happen so there are no surprises and allocate someone to go with them if they want to leave at any point. If possible, help include them in arrangements and in making simple decisions that affect them.

Child Bereavement UK has some useful animations that might help explain to your child why we have funerals or memorial services and what usually happens at them. See our useful resources on page 15.

Encourage children to return to familiar routines

It's not unusual for children to want to return to their normal routine as soon as possible. Their life at home may have been very disrupted. They may find comfort in their regular routine at school or college and the normality it provides away from home.

It's important to involve them in this decision, otherwise they may feel they are expected to pretend nothing has happened. Explore the option of opting out of stressful situations such as exams and tests if that is what they would prefer. If there must be changes to routines, explain why and what will happen.

Provide outlets for grieving

It might help to give your child opportunities to express their grief through non-verbal means such as art, music or physical activity as well as quiet time.

Some children may withdraw into themselves. Include them in activities but allow them time and space too.

Children may also use drawing, writing or games to make sense of what happened.

Some support organisations run workshops and activities for children to help them process their grief or get away from it when needed.

Give your child opportunities to remember the person who died

Everyone processes grief differently. It can be especially difficult with complicated grief after a suicide. Offer different opportunities for remembrance and follow their lead.

They may want to write a poem, draw a picture or choose

a flower to put on the coffin or take to the grave. The person's birthday could be marked by a visit to their favourite place, by making art or music to remember them or by writing them a letter. Family rituals may help them express their feelings and give them a sense of belonging.

Special days and anniversaries can be opportunities for remembrance but may also be difficult and emotional. Sometimes the lead up to these days can be harder than the day itself. Keep talking to your child about how you and they feel and seek out support if you need it.



Talk to other adults the child sees regularly

It can help to share details about what the child has been told, how they are coping and the support they need. You could share our leaflet for professionals on supporting children after the suicide of a parent or caregiver. You can find this online at teamluna.org.

Don't assume that they don't need support

Older children and teenagers may deal with intense emotions in difficult ways. They may hide their feelings to protect you. Some use risk-taking or aggressive behaviour as a way of coping with difficult or frightening feelings.

They may appear not to need or want any support. This is often the time when they need it most. If you are finding it difficult to support a young person with their grief, seek help for you and them from the specialist local services listed on page 13.

I wanted to look after my mum, I wanted to make sure my sister was okay, and now he's gone, I am the only adult male there, so I had to hold it in for them. I felt like I had to keep my feelings to myself, to not put it on them because they were going through enough.

Alex

Continue to talk openly

Children and young people pick up on how adults behave after a traumatic event. Try to speak openly about the suicide and the person who died. This will help them feel comfortable doing the same.

If you are worried about a young person's own risk of suicide, ask them directly if they are having any thoughts of ending their life or harming themselves. This gives them an opportunity to talk to you about how they are feeling, reduces stigma and helps them find the right support.

Local support

All these services can be accessed at any time after your bereavement. Everyone is different and it is always worth trying again if the first contact doesn't feel right for you or your child.

Most of these services will offer support across the whole of Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes. Some are only available in certain areas.

CHUMS provide specialist bereavement support for children and young people and families in Bedfordshire and Luton (but not Milton Keynes). CHUMS offer one-to-one, group and drop-in sessions and can make sure the support is right for the child's situation. You can make a referral online using this link.

chums.uk.com/bedfordshire-suicide-bereavement/

CHUMS also work with the CAMHS (Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service) to support children and young people who have been traumatically bereaved. You can make a referral online using this link.

chums.uk.com/trauma-service/

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SoBS) may help you feel less alone. They offer support via email, information, a support line and an online forum for people over 18. They have a local support group in Bedford.

uksobs.org/support-groups/bedford/

Harry's Rainbow supports children affected by the death of a significant family member such as a parent or sibling. They provide memory boxes and books, wellbeing packs, trips and activities, therapeutic mentoring and free short breaks for families. They run monthly support groups for different age children and adults.

They are based in Milton Keynes but will support children from Bedfordshire and Luton. Families can refer themselves or they can be referred by others.

01908 061676
info@harrysrainbow.co.uk
harrysrainbow.co.uk/view/referral-form

Child Bereavement UK have a support centre in Milton Keynes and can support families from across the wider area face-to-face or via video chat or telephone.

You can refer your child via the helpline, Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm.

0800 028 8840
helpline@childbereavement.org
www.childbereavement.org

Mind BLMK offer a Bereavement by Suicide support service for Milton Keynes. They can offer you a safe space to talk and ask questions, support them to access specialist counselling and help them find a way forwards. They do not support children specifically but can work with you as a family.

0300 330 0648
hq@mind-blmk.org.uk

National support

Grief Encounter provides support for bereaved children, young people and families, including those bereaved by suicide. You can refer your child on the website.

They have a free helpline, email and live chat via their website.

0808 802 0111
griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk
griefencounter.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK provides free specialist support to anyone affected by the death of someone close to them, including by suicide. They can offer support in parenting a bereaved child. They have a free helpline, email and live chat via their website.

0800 028 8840
helpline@childbereavement.org
www.childbereavement.org

Winston's Wish provides support for children and young people up to the age of 25 following the death of someone close to them, including by suicide. They offer a free helpline, online support, live chat, email, one-to-one and group support and training.

0808 802 0021
ask@winstonswish.org
winstonswish.org

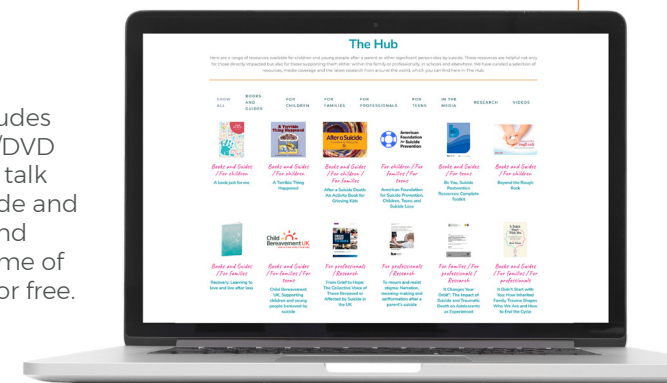
Suicide&Co provides support for people over 18 bereaved by suicide. They have a helpline, resources online and a free counselling service.

0800 054 0400
suicideandco.org

Useful resources and information

Luna's resource library (The Hub) has links to a lot of useful resources that you might find helpful. This includes stories, workbooks and film/DVD resources that can help you talk to your children about suicide and help children understand and work through their grief. Some of them can be downloaded for free.

Find them here:
teamluna.org/the-hub



Grassroots Suicide Prevention have an app called **Stay Alive**. Young people can use it if they are having thoughts of suicide or if they are concerned about someone else. The app also includes a safety plan, customisable reasons for living, and a life box where young people can store photos that are important to them. It also contains suicide bereavement resources.

stayalive.app

Support after Suicide Partnership provides online support and advice for you, including an option to search for local support. Their downloadable booklet *Help is at Hand* contains lots of useful information and guidance.

supportaftersuicide.org.uk/resource/help-is-at-hand/

hello@teamluna.org
teamluna.org



About Luna Foundation

The content in this leaflet was produced by Luna Foundation for Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes, supported by the BLMK Suicide Prevention Steering Group.

Luna Foundation was founded in March 2022 by Anna Wardley. It aims to transform the way children and young people are supported after suicide bereavement, particularly after the death of a parent or primary caregiver. Every child or young person who loses a parent to suicide deserves timely support to help them navigate their complicated grief and reduce the risks they face to their own mental health and wellbeing.

Luna offers evidence-informed suicide bereavement training for people who work with children and young people. In addition to campaigning work, they share resources, best practice and guidance to help improve the way children left behind after suicide are cared for.

Visit teamluna.org for more information.

About the author

The guidance provided in this leaflet is based on the Churchill Fellowship international research carried out by Luna Foundation CEO Anna Wardley, who published her report entitled *Time to count: Improving the support for children who lose a parent to suicide* in December 2021.

