



Luton



Central
Bedfordshire

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City Council

Working together to
improve the health
and wellbeing of our
communities

Supporting children and young people after the suicide of a parent or carer

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

Luna guides:
Families in Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes



teamluna.org

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Children are surprisingly resilient. A loving, supportive environment and careful attention to any emerging psychiatric symptoms can offset even such a major stressor as a parent's suicide.

Holly C. Wilcox, Johns Hopkins University, USA

The right support, at the right time

We don't know how many children lose a parent to suicide each year. Nobody counts them. It's estimated that 25 children lose a parent to suicide every day in the UK. That's more than 9,000 a year.ⁱ

Bereavement by suicide is different to other types of death. The suicide or attempted suicide of a parent or carer can have a devastating and long-term impact on their child.

- It poses significant risks to mental health. The children of parents who take their own lives are twice as likely to be hospitalised due to depression.ⁱⁱ
- It increases the likelihood they will engage in risk-taking behaviour such as problem substance use and self-harm.ⁱⁱⁱ

- It increases their risk of suicide. They are three times more likely to end their own life compared to the wider population. Recent research suggests children are more at risk if they lose their mother to suicide and most at risk if they lose a parent between the ages of 2 and 5 years. Young people aged 15-19 are most likely to attempt suicide, often using a similar method to their parent.^{iv}

The right support at the right time can mitigate these risks. The chain of poor mental health and suicide risk can be broken, preventing future suicides from taking place.

Schools and colleges play an important role in providing that support. Those with existing relationships of trust are well placed to listen, provide reassurance and help the young person access important specialist support.

I got referred to a psychiatric unit because they were so worried about me, they thought I was going to go the same way.

James^v

Suicide impact and bereavement policies

You may find it helpful to check if your school or organisation has a suicide impact and bereavement policy. This policy can help you understand how your school or

organisation plans to support a family bereaved by suicide. It can also give you specific guidance. Luna Foundation can provide a policy template if needed.



We have some examples of helpful phrases on page 12.

Children bereaved by parental suicide are not only left trying to understand why a parent took his or her own life, but also have to cope with the impact on the surviving caregiver, who may not be able to provide the support they need.

Mitchell & Terhorst, 2017



Feelings and behaviours after losing a parent or carer to suicide

Children and young people are likely to feel a wide range of complicated emotions after the suicide of a parent or carer, both immediately and in the longer term.

They may need your help to manage them and find the right specialist support.

Depending on the child's age and their relationship with the parent they have lost, they may feel:

- isolated and different to others
- unable to talk to friends because they don't really understand
- ambivalent towards the person who died
- anger at the person who has died, or people who have survived
- anxious
- depressed
- regret at things left unsaid
- relief
- shame about feeling relief
- guilt stemming from a sense of feeling responsible
- fear of abandonment or rejection
- unsafe
- a lack of self-worth and a need to prove themselves.

People don't know what to say, and that's the worst bit about it because I felt like on my own at college. I couldn't talk to anybody about it.

Leah

A child or young person may:

- use substances or activities to 'numb out' and avoid strong feelings
- find it difficult to trust others
- jump in and out of their grief to protect themselves from overwhelming emotions (particularly younger children)
- appear fine, then seem upset for a while, then seem fine again (particularly younger children)
- expose themselves to danger
- have difficulty forming safe and secure relationships.

Supporting children and young people bereaved by suicide

Talk about it

Talking about suicide openly gives children and young people the chance to express their feelings in a safe environment. There is no evidence to suggest that this increases their own risk of self-harm or suicide. This is a myth grounded in stigma.

We have tips and suggestions to help you talk to children and young people about suicide on page 10.

Give them time

Young children often jump in and out of their grief (sometimes referred to as 'puddle jumping'). They may be upset, appear to be fine for a while, become upset again and so on. This can be confusing and may make you think they have not been seriously affected. In fact, it's a natural way to protect themselves from becoming overwhelmed by powerful feelings. They will need time and understanding to help them process their grief.

Older children and adolescents will also need time to make sense of their emotions and understand there is support available. Don't assume that because they appear okay after a time, that they are not still struggling.

Signpost to specialist support – and help them access it

Bereavement by suicide is distinct from other types of death, especially for young people. This is due to the potential for complex feelings of guilt, shame, abandonment and the impact on self-worth (see our section on feelings and behaviours on page 5). These feelings can lead to complicated grief resulting in a long-term impact on mental wellbeing.

The child or young person is likely to need specialist support. As well as making them aware of the support and signposting them, you may be able to make a referral yourself.

Young people may need help to overcome barriers to accessing the right support, whether this be lack of time, confidence or transport. They may not feel that it will be helpful, or struggle to engage appropriately.

It might help to show them stories from people who the organisation has helped in the past (usually available on their website), help them plan what they might say if they get in touch and how they might talk about what they need.

You know I wasn't in a fit state to tell myself oh yes, I need to do this. I wish that someone had, said "look these are your options, and we can have a word with your mum as well."

Alex

Support the whole family

Find out what the child or young person already knows and what they understand about the death, taking into account their developmental level. It's important they have consistent information from the different adults in their life.

Find out what support is already in place and refer to specialist local and national support organisations (see local and national support information on pages 13-15).

Share any care plans your organisation has in place with the family.

Promote truthfulness

Encourage the family to be honest about the cause of death with their child. If appropriate, sensitively share some of the risks associated with the non-disclosure of a suicide.

- It can deepen stigma and reinforce isolation.
- Children and young people can't clarify confusion and ask questions.
- It breaks down trust with surviving family members.
- Children can't access postvention services and specialist support.
- Other survivors of suicide can't offer kinship and peer support.
- It can damage family relationships when the truth inevitably does emerge, even if this is years later.

You could share our leaflet for families with them too.

He said "you need to buckle up". What angered me the most, is the fact that I was treated like I was normal again and I wasn't normal you know.

Alex

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

It's usually helpful for children to attend a funeral or memorial ceremony if they want to. It's 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. It may also foster long term resentment as they get older and realise they were excluded.

Support their return to school

A carefully managed and well supported return to school or college can make a huge difference. If possible, you should:

- allow the child and their parents to meet key staff to talk about their return
- ask the child how they would like to return – full time or a phased return
- clarify and respect what the family wishes to share about the cause of death
- share with the child what has been communicated to their teachers or peers already

- plan what to do in the event of private information becoming public
- develop a long-term care plan for the young person and brief all staff
- revisit this care plan regularly.

Provide outlets for grieving and age-appropriate resources

It might help to give the child or young person 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.

The pastoral team at school were brilliant as they provided a safe space I could go to if I felt overwhelmed during lesson time following returning from bereavement leave. But some teachers were more concerned about my attendance and grades which made me feel like I was failing, when really I was grieving.

Abbie – Luna Lived Experience Network

Be compassionate

Compassion and reassurance are vital. Tell the child or young person that they are loved, nothing is their fault and that everyone is there to support them. You may have to repeat these things many times.

Provide opportunities for normality

One of the most important roles for schools and colleges is to provide a familiar routine and opportunities for normality. After a traumatic experience, a young person can often find comfort in their regular routine at school or college and the 'normality' it provides away from home. This can include taking part in clubs and activities, being around trusted adult, having fun with friends and feeling loved.



Talking about suicide with children and young people

The bereaved family may want you to tell their child what has happened. It's usually best they are told by someone they love and trust, such as their surviving parent. They should also be in a familiar environment if possible. You can support the family to do this. You may want to share our leaflet for families with them.

These tips will help you support the family and in your own conversations with the child or young person.

- Use age-appropriate, straightforward language. Children need to understand that death is irreversible. It's important to say clearly that they have died, or that their body has stopped working.

For example, 'He took too many tablets on purpose, and they stopped his heart working'. 'She died because she put something tight round her neck'.

- Give the child enough information to help them understand but don't go into lots of extra detail immediately. As they process 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 it. For someone in a suicidal state it can feel like their only option.
- 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 reinforce the stigma around suicide.
- Avoid comments that encourage them to become an adult too soon. Phrases like, 'You are going to have to look after your mum now' add a level of responsibility that they should not have to cope with. It may also encourage them to hide their own feelings rather than seeking the help they need.
- Give the child or young person the opportunity to ask questions and answer them truthfully as they arise.

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

- 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.
- Find out if they have anyone else they can talk to. You could ask, 'Can you talk to your dad about how you are feeling? Who else could you talk to?'
- Avoid saying anything that suggests the person was selfish or took the easy way out. Remember you are criticising someone who the child or young person loves deeply.
- 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.



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.

‘It’s so understandable you feel that way.’

‘This is not your fault at all. Your mum/dad loved you very much and we are all here for you.’

‘When someone does something that stops their own 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.’

‘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. It might feel like it, but 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?’

‘Don’t worry if you cry or can’t find the words for a while. Sometimes letting your emotions and feelings out together is a good thing and can help a little bit.’

‘It sounds like you have so many difficult and confusing feelings all mixed up inside you. There are people who can help you sort them out a bit. Shall we have a look at some different support organisations online together and see if any of them might feel right for you?’

Specialist support in your area

All these services can be accessed at any time after the bereavement. Everyone is different and it is always worth encouraging families to try again if the first contact doesn’t feel right for them or their child. You may need to actively support a young person to get in touch for themselves.

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/

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.

Referrals can be made via the helpline, Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm. They can take third party referrals but encourage self-referrals where possible.

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



Mind BLMK offer a Bereavement by Suicide support service for Milton Keynes. They can offer parents 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.

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

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SoBS) may help surviving parents 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/

National support

Grief Encounter provides support for bereaved children, young people and families, including those bereaved by suicide.

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

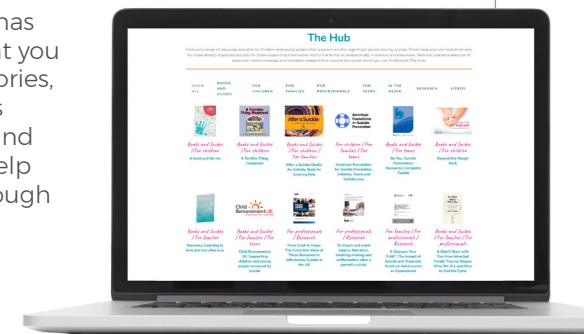
Suicide&Co provides support for people over 18 bereaved by suicide. They have a helpline, resources online and a free counselling service.

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 children and young people 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.

styalive.app

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

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

Footnotes

- ⁱ <https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/suicide-bereavement-support/>
- ⁱⁱ Wilcox HC, Kuramoto SJ, Lichtenstein P, Långström N, Brent DA, Runeson B. Psychiatric morbidity, violent crime, and suicide among children and adolescents exposed to parental death. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2010 May;49(5):514-23; quiz 530. doi: 10.1097/00004583-201005000-00012. Erratum in: *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2010 Aug;49(8):858-9. PMID: 20431471.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Andriessen K, Kryszynska K, Rickwood D, Pirkis J. "It Changes Your Orbit": The Impact of Suicide and Traumatic Death on Adolescents as Experienced by Adolescents and Parents. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020 Dec 14;17(24):9356. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17249356. PMID: 33327577; PMCID: PMC7765017.
- ^{iv} Ranning, A, Madsen, T, Hawton K, Nordentoft, M, Eriangsen, A. Transgenerational concordance in parent-to-child transmission of suicidal behaviour: a retrospective, nationwide, register-based cohort study of 4 419 642 individuals in Denmark. Published: March 27, 2022 DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(22\)00042-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(22)00042-6)
- ^v Quotes taken from research with permission - Baxter, Paula (2019) *School after suicide: children and young peoples experience in education after losing a parent to suicide*. DEdCpsy thesis, University of Sheffield.

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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.

