

# Explaining Suicide Attempts to Children

## Introduction to Parents

Your family is navigating a difficult topic. Suicide is not an easy topic to talk about, especially when you are worried about a loved one. This pamphlet is here to help guide you as you speak with your other children in your home and provide you with the most immediate information you will need. You are not alone. Suicide is more common than most people realize.

Everyone in the family will experience a variety of feelings. There is no right or wrong way to feel. This process takes time. Please make sure the other children know you are there for them. Additionally, find time to check in with them regularly. They need your presence too.

### Getting started

You may be thinking, what do I tell my children? The information on the next page may help guide you. Here are some general tips as you navigate these conversations:

- Find a quiet place with few distractions.
- Children often process through age-appropriate play. It is okay to provide them with physical and creative outlets to process.
- If your child has another close adult, you should include them so they have someone to talk to when you are helping other family members.
- Children do best if they receive information in an age-appropriate way.
- Provide the information they need to know; they don't need to know everything all at once. Answer the questions they've asked, and feel free to table the rest.

### Helpful information

The days ahead may feel overwhelming. Your family member may have a hospital stay and a safety plan as they come home. This is a tool to help them navigate their feelings while keeping them safe.

Prepare the children if anything at home is going to change. For example, "we are moving the medication to a different location."

- Ensure the child does not feel responsible for maintaining the safety plan.
- Reach out to the school so they know the child may be struggling. School counselors can be excellent resources for support.

Children often have questions that can catch us off guard. If you struggle to navigate these questions, ask for help from a mental health professional.

- They may ask, "Why did they want to die?" You can say, "I don't know," and then focus the conversation on how their loved one is getting help.
- Often, faith-based questions come up. It is okay to share your faith, but avoid shaming the person who attempted suicide.

## Under 3

**Language:** Keep it simple. Focus on the change that the child will notice. For example, you could say, “---is in the hospital” or “Their body is hurt, and they are in the hospital.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Children will not understand the complexities of this situation but will sense the emotions of their caretakers.
- It is okay to seek support no matter how you’re coping.

**How to Help:**

- Maintain your child’s routine as much as possible.
- Be patient if your child begins to regress to an earlier stage of development (ex: potty trained, may have accidents).

## Ages 3-6

**Language:** Children are looking for concrete phrases. They will need to hear words like, “--- was feeling sad and hurt themselves” or “--- hurt their body.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Children may not sit for a long conversation; it may occur over time.
- Don’t be alarmed if a child immediately leaves the conversation to play or do a typical activity.

**How to Help:**

- Allow play; this helps them express their feelings.
- Maintain the child’s routine as much as possible.
- Be patient if your child begins to regress to an earlier stage of development (ex: separation anxiety).

## Ages 7-11

**Language:** Children understand more at this age. Some phrases suggested, “Their brain was sick in a way that made them feel hopeless, and they attempted to hurt themselves,” or “at this time, we are still trying to understand those feelings and why they decided to hurt themselves.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Peers become very important at their age, so they may share this information with their friends before sharing it with adults or parents.
- Children can often think they caused or did something to make this happen.

**How to Help:**

- Your child may need help determining how to address this situation with their peers or how to talk to their loved ones when they see them again.
- Check in with them often.

## Ages 12-17

**Language:** Adolescents are fully able to understand suicide. You can use words like “They attempted suicide” or “at this time, we are still trying to understand those feelings and why they decided to attempt suicide.”

**Keep in mind:**

- Adolescents’ feelings may change from day to day.
- Allow space to feel whatever emotions come up, as long as they are not physically hurting themselves or others.
- Adolescents may need help setting boundaries or sharing about their loved one with others (ex., what they want to say, how to redirect questions).

**How to Help:**

- If you see a significant change in behavior or mood, please seek professional help.
- It may be helpful for the school to understand so they can provide some support and flexibility during this time.
- Continue to be present and available for your child.

Be in a  
Neutral, Safe  
Setting

Use Age  
Appropriate  
Language

Deliver  
Information  
in Bite Size  
Pieces

Be Prepared  
for Mixed  
Emotions

Give Physical  
and Creative  
Outlets