



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



How to Talk to a Preschool Child about a Suicide Attempt in Your Family

This information is intended to inform and guide adults when talking with a two to five year old child after a suicide attempt in the family. It is not intended to replace the advice of a mental health professional. In fact, it may be best to use this along with professional support if you or your child is struggling with how to talk about this difficult topic. It is important to consider your child's level of development and ability to understand events when deciding how to talk with him. Sticking to the simple facts and answering any questions he asks may be all he needs. ("Dad was feeling bad and had to go to the hospital.")

Talking to your preschool age child after a suicide attempt in the family

Without the support of family or other caring adults, a young child may try to make sense of this confusing situation on his own. Children this age have magical thinking, and their own ideas about what is happening can be more frightening than the situation itself. Because preschool children do not have the vocabulary to express all their thoughts and feelings, they may act out at times. Small children, when stressed, may exhibit changes in behavior, such as temper tantrums. They may also have trouble sleeping, and may become clingy because they are feeling insecure, anxious, or fearful. Younger children are self-interested by nature, and so they may blame themselves and feel guilty because they think they have caused the problem. Children this age will need lots of reassurance from you, and a sense that problems can be solved. It is important to instill a sense of hope that their parent/relative, while struggling, can get help and get well.

When should you talk to your child about a suicide attempt?

- Choose a place that is private and comfortable, where your child will feel free to talk. Also be aware of what she may overhear from other conversations about a family member's suicide attempt.
- If your child was elsewhere and not exposed, consider what he needs to know to make sense of the changes happening in his life.
- The goal is not to overwhelm the child with information, but to answer questions in a calm, non-judgmental way, so he is not afraid to ask more questions.

How should you talk with your child?

- Choose a place that is private and comfortable, where your child will feel free to talk. Also be aware of what she may overhear from other conversations about a family member's suicide attempt.
- Understand that young children may only be able to deal with a little bit of information at a time, and may ask more questions over time.
- Keep it simple and use words that your child will understand. Be honest and direct, but do not provide more details than the child needs. Let her responses and questions guide you when deciding how much information to provide.
- Be aware of your own feelings and how you are coming across. For example, your child could mistake an angry tone of voice to mean that you are angry with her. A calm, gentle tone will help her feel safe to open up to you.
- Ask your child age-appropriate questions, and allow her to freely express even difficult or uncomfortable emotions without judgment.
- Small children may express their feelings or fears through make believe play. If your child can't express her questions directly, consider spending play time together. She can practice expressing her feelings in other ways, through art, music and other forms of expression.
- Reading books or stories may make it easier for small children to express themselves, indirectly, by identifying with the characters. "How do you think the bunny rabbit felt when he got lost in the woods?"

If you notice that your child is unusually withdrawn, tearful, or depressed, seek professional help or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For additional resources and information for families and providers visit: <http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/> or <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.

Other ways to comfort your very young child

- By continuing certain dependable, daily routines even in a difficult time, you can help your child feel cared for and safe. Calming bedtime rituals, such as a bath or reading time will be even more important to your child now.
- While providing stability, also remain flexible to a child's emotional needs during a disruptive time.
- Very young children receive special comfort from physical as well as verbal expressions of affection, such as hugs. Offer extra support and attention during this time (examples: games, reading together, physical closeness).
- Get other support people involved (family, friends or clergy). This will benefit you, and in turn benefit your child.
- As the parent/relative who has been hospitalized becomes more stable, consider if it would be helpful to offer your child a chance to visit him in the hospital.
- Preschool children are very sensitive to the emotional state of their caregivers. Caregivers should try to care for their own emotions, including grief privately when possible, and concentrate on the child's needs when together.
- Show your child that her day-to-day life will remain stable, and that her basic needs will continue to be met.

What to say to your child

- Start with his understanding of the situation. *"I want to talk to you about what happened with dad. What do you remember from last night?"*
- Depending on his grasp of the situation, describe what has happened. Make sure to use simple language, providing only as much detail as needed to answer his questions. *"Mom is in the hospital because she is not feeling well."*
- If your child indicates a greater level of awareness or asks more questions... *"Your sister was feeling very sad and hurt herself."*
- Inform him about emotional struggles. *"Grandpa has been feeling very sad lately."*
- Address guilt, blame, shame, and responsibility. *"I want you to know that this is not anyone's fault."*
- Assure him that his family member is getting treatment/care. *"Dad is in the hospital getting help."*
- Let him know that his daily routine will stay the same. *"Even though it is different that Mom is not here, you will still go to daycare/preschool tomorrow."*
- Encourage him to express his feelings, and to know that his feelings are normal and expected. *"How are you feeling? This can be hard to talk about. Would you like to draw a picture of your feelings?"*
- Ask if he has any questions. *"Do you have any questions about what happened with Grandpa?"*
- Help create a connection between your child and his family member. Tell him when he can expect to see his family member again. *"Your brother will be in the hospital for a few days until he feels better. Would you like to draw a picture for him while he is there?"*
- Allow him not to talk if he desires, and to choose who he talks to. *"If you don't want to talk about it now, that's okay. We can talk about it later, or you can talk to Grandma, too."*
- Let him know you are getting support too. *"We have lots of friends and relatives who are helping us."*

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