



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

A guide for professionals in Greater Manchester



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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?’



Local support

There are specialist bereavement support services throughout Greater Manchester. Some offer services across the whole region while others are specific to certain boroughs.

Everyone experiences grief differently. You may need to encourage families to explore different support offers till they find the one best suited to their needs at the time. You may need to actively support a young person to make contact with their chosen organisation and help them navigate any initial processes involved.

The **Greater Manchester Bereavement Service** can help you find the right support for the children, young people and families you work with. They can provide information on local support and, with consent, contact services on a client’s behalf. They also offer a call back service where they can get back in touch to check in with bereaved families. It is staffed by trained counsellors.

The service also has dedicated suicide bereavement practitioners to ensure that those bereaved or affected by suicide can speak to someone who will have a greater

understanding of what they may be going through and help them access appropriate support.

Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm (except bank holidays)

Suicide bereavement information can also be found on their website at greater-manchester-bereavement-service.org.uk/learn-more-useful-info

Interpreters can be arranged.

0161 983 0902
gmicb-sal.gm.bs@nhs.net
greater-manchester-bereavement-service.org.uk

Support across Greater Manchester

The **Caribbean and African Health Network** can support children and young people in the Black community, who are under the age of 24 and have been bereaved by parental suicide. They offer person centred one-to-one, group and family counselling in person, on the phone or online (depending on location). They are based in Longsight in the City of Manchester but can offer support throughout Greater Manchester.

Helpline: 07710 022 382
Enquiries: 07853 556 591
info@cahn.org.uk
cahn.org.uk/trained-counsellors

Child Bereavement UK can support families from across Greater Manchester 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
childbereavement.org

Kooth is an online mental health service for 11-25 year olds in Greater Manchester. They offer fully trained professional counsellors and emotional wellbeing practitioners for text-based messaging and weekly one-to-one support chats. They can offer initial confidential and anonymous support to young people bereaved by parental suicide and can help them access further specialised services when and if they feel ready.

kooth.com/login

The **Shining a Light on Suicide** campaign website provides information for those who have been bereaved by suicide. It may be useful for families and surviving parents and carers.

shiningalightonsuicide.org.uk/bereaved-by-suicide/

Once Upon a Smile offers in-person bereavement support (including suicide bereavement) for children and families from their dedicated centre in Sidley House, Trafford. The service is available for anyone in Greater Manchester. They can support children bereaved by suicide aged 5-18 (although they have some flexibility). Parents and carers can make a referral through a link on their website.

0161 711 0339
info@onceuponasmile.org.uk
onceuponasmile.org.uk

BLGC - Bolton

BLGC works with children and young person bereaved by parental suicide (aged 8-18) living in the Bolton area or attending a Bolton school. They run sessions in schools and at their building in Bolton town centre.

They offer one to one bereavement support sessions or trauma counselling. The service can also support professionals working with bereaved families. The bereavement must have been more than six months ago. They accept self-referrals from young people, parents and carers.

01204 504 100
bereavement@blgc.co.uk
blgc.co.uk/targeted-youth-services/what-we-offer/bolton_bereavement_services

Gaddum - Salford and City of Manchester

Gaddum's bereavement services provide therapeutic support to children and young people aged 5-18 who have suffered a bereavement and/ or traumatic bereavement and live in Salford or the City of Manchester. They can work with children and young people from six months after the bereavement. Parents and young people can make a referral on the website. Professionals can also refer, with consent.

0161 834 6069
therapy@gaddum.org.uk
gaddum.org.uk/therapy/child-bereavement

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 local support groups in **Stockport, Bolton, Wigan** and **Ashton-Under-Lyne**.

uksobs.org/support-groups

Local support

In this section we share information about services who offer support in specific boroughs of Greater Manchester. The Greater Manchester Bereavement Service (see page 13) may be able to help you find newer services not listed here.

#THRIVE - Rochdale

#Thrive provides emotional health and wellbeing support for children (up to age 19) and families who live in Rochdale, Heywood or Middleton, or are registered with a GP there. They have a Family Grief Counsellor who can provide specialist support to children who've been bereaved traumatically.

0161 716 2844
pcn-tr.thrivehmr@nhs.net
penninecare.nhs.uk/thrive

Early Break - Bury

Early Break work in several boroughs but they currently only offer bereavement and loss counselling services to children and young people aged between 5-18 in **Bury**.

Referrals can be made via CAMHS Single Point of Access. They are unable to accept self-referrals.

0161 723 3880
info@earlybreak.co.uk
earlybreak.co.uk

Family Welfare - Wigan

Family Welfare supports bereaved children, young people and families in the Wigan area, at a Wigan school or registered with a Wigan GP. Professionals can make a referral on their website or families can get in touch directly.

01942 867888
admin@familywelfare.co.uk
familywelfare.co.uk/child-bereavement

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
childbereavement.org

The **Jewish Bereavement Counselling Service** offers confidential online or telephone counselling to individuals, couples, children and families in the Jewish Community who are experiencing loss. They can support people bereaved by parental suicide.

020 8951 3881
jbcs.org.uk

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 do not run face to face services in the North West but they offer a free helpline, online support, live chat and email support.

0808 802 0021
ask@winstonswish.org
winstonswish.org

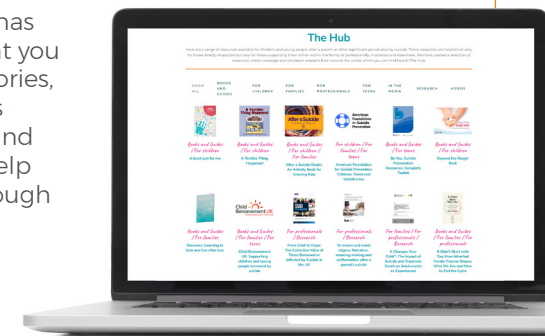
Suicide&Co provides support for people over 18 bereaved by suicide. They have a helpline, resources online and a free counselling service.

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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teamluna.org



About Luna Foundation

The content in this leaflet was produced by the Luna Foundation for the Greater Manchester Suicide Prevention Programme.

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.

