

Step by Step

Information for
parents and carers ←

This guidance forms part of Samaritans' Step by Step resources for communities working with and supporting young people. Step by Step is a Samaritans service offering support, resources and practical advice for adults who work with young people and their communities, that have been impacted by an attempted or suspected suicide.

If you would like to find out more about this service:

✉ stepbystep@samaritans.org ☎ 0808 168 2528

SAMARITANS

A suicide in a school is a very sad and traumatic event for students, staff, parents and the wider school community. This leaflet provides information to help you support the child in your care and help you understand your own feelings during this tough time.

Samaritans has many years experience of supporting people through difficult times. We hope that by sharing what we have learned with you, it may provide you with the knowledge and support you may need to help you and the child in your care cope with what has happened.

How do people respond to a suicide?

People cope with suicide in different ways and not all reactions are the same. It often leaves people asking “*why?*” or “*what could I have done?*” and coping with a wide range of difficult feelings including:

- ◉ Anger
- ◉ Disbelief
- ◉ Isolation
- ◉ Betrayal
- ◉ Fear
- ◉ Numbness
- ◉ Confusion
- ◉ Guilt
- ◉ Shock
- ◉ Detached
- ◉ Hurt
- ◉ Tearful

These feelings can sometimes be made worse by unhelpful responses by individuals, the community and the media.

However the child in your care is feeling, they need to be able to express their feelings in a safe way. Reassurance and attention are important. They will probably have many questions and they may find it difficult to understand what has happened.

Some young people may find it harder to cope than others. This is especially true for young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives. Talk to someone if you are worried about their reaction or behaviour.

How can I help the child in my care?

Listen carefully to what they say, and ask about how they feel.

Give them the time to talk about what has happened. They may want to ask you questions about what has happened and why. It is never easy to answer questions about why someone may wish to end their life. Suicide is complex and it is better to focus on remembering the person and not the way they died.

Details about the suicide should not be given to students, nor should you ask young people to give details, as this is potentially harmful.

Remind young people that talking about the details of the death can be upsetting and disrespectful to the family that has been bereaved and can lead to guessing and incorrect information. Focus on the things they would like to remember about the person who has died. Steer conversations to positive coping methods: talking about their feelings, supporting friends and building a stronger school community.

At this time the important messages to get across are:

- ◉ suicide takes away the possibility of things getting better
- ◉ there are always solutions and people who will be there to help until things get better
- ◉ pain is only temporary and that things will improve but death is permanent.

Try to be accepting and open-minded. Let your child know you are there for them, whatever the circumstances. Assure them that it's good to talk about how they feel, and that they have your support. Don't try and come up with reasons for a suicide or place the blame on anyone. Don't say anything that may suggest that suicide was a reasonable solution for that person eg *"it's probably for the best"* – this is of no comfort and can be harmful.

If necessary, offer to help them get support by contacting a teacher, GP, school counsellor, bereavement specialist or talking to us at Samaritans. Try not to take it personally if they are unwilling to talk to you about what has happened. That's not unusual and they may look to friends or mentors for support or simply carry on as normal. There are no right or wrong ways of coping. They just need to know they have support if and when they need it. Encourage them to seek help if they are worried about a friend.

Be aware of your own feelings. Be honest with yourself about how their reaction is affecting you. If you are struggling with your feelings, talk to us at Samaritans or seek other help.

Remember that there will be many people affected. Suicide has a ripple effect and impacts in different ways all the people that someone has been connected to. Everyone who has been affected by a suicide needs to be reassured that they are not alone and that help is available, should they need it.

There may be a funeral or a ceremony held to remember the deceased. The child in your care may or may not wish to attend and they may need an explanation of what to expect, or support after the event.

Be aware of the effects of the media. It may help to watch the news and read printed/online articles together so that you can talk about any concerns that are raised.

Sometimes parents are approached directly by journalists for comment – you are under no obligation to speak to them. If you do comment, it's important to remember not to go into detail about the suicide, and to focus on how everyone is feeling and how others can seek help if they need it. You can seek advice from the school affected.

Be aware of the online environment. The child in your care may wish to join or comment on online memorial pages. Remind them of the importance of expressing feelings in a safe way and supporting others, while being respectful to the school and the bereaved family.

Remember that although the school will be trying to keep school life as normal as possible, many people, including staff, will be managing difficult emotions. When talking to others, the best approach is to be respectful of the wishes of the bereaved family and follow the school's advice. Avoid glamorising or sharing details of the suicide, and always encourage others to seek help if they need it.

Why do people, including children and young people, take their lives?

There is often no single reason why people take their own lives. More often, it is due to a combination of circumstances which they feel powerless to change. Young people who take their own lives have often experienced difficulties that have built up over a long period of time, to the point where they can see no other way to stop the pain. In most cases, that can be changed with the right level of support.

Are there warning signs that someone is feeling suicidal?

It can be very difficult to tell if someone is suicidal, especially if they find it hard to talk about their feelings. People in crisis react in different ways. Nevertheless you may notice some behavioural changes, such as the individual becoming withdrawn or animated.

Signs that someone might be having suicidal thoughts and feelings include:

- ◉ giving away their belongings
- ◉ seeing no way to resolve their fears or anxieties
- ◉ becoming more isolated from friends and family
- ◉ unusual displays of anger or impatience towards friends and family
- ◉ being tearful for no obvious reason
- ◉ not being able to cope with small everyday events
- ◉ increased risk-taking
- ◉ using phrases such as *“what’s the point anymore?”*, *“I don’t want to wake up”*, *“they’d be better off without me”*.

If you are concerned about your child, encourage them to talk to someone. If someone is talking about having suicidal thoughts and feelings, always take it seriously. Supporting someone who is struggling to cope can be difficult. If you need to talk about how you are feeling, you can contact us at any time.

Where else can I go for support and information?

Breathing Spaces Scotland is a free, confidential phone and web-based service for people in Scotland experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety: www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) can provide information about counsellors in your area: **0870 443 5252**, www.bacp.co.uk

Child Bereavement UK provides support to families grieving the loss of a child, and advice for professionals working with bereaved families: **01494 568900**, www.childbereavement.org.uk

ChildLine provides support services to children and young people: **0800 1111**, www.childline.org.uk

Help is at Hand provides people affected by suicide with both emotional and practical support: www.supportaftersuicide.org.uk

Samaritans are available round the clock, every single day of the year. We can help you talk through whatever is troubling you, find the answers that are right for you and offer support: **116 123** (this number is free to call), email jo@samaritans.org

Winston's Wish provides practical support and guidance to bereaved children, young people and their families: **08452 030405**, www.winstonswish.org.uk

Young Minds offers advice and support to parents worried about their children's emotional or mental wellbeing: **0808 8025544**, www.youngminds.org.uk

Someone to talk to – people contact us when things are getting to them. They don't have to be suicidal.

We're always here – round the clock, every single day of the year.

A safe place – as volunteers we're ordinary people, and keep all our conversations private.

People can be themselves – whoever they are, however they feel, whatever life's done to them.

We're a charity – it's the public's kind donations that help fund our service.

 [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)

SAMARITANS