

Safe Harbour

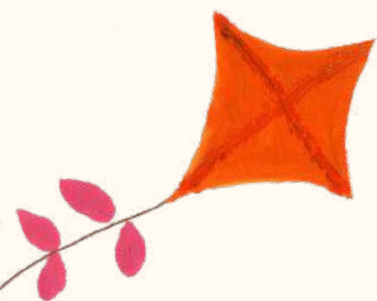
A Helpful Guide for Parents and Carers

This guide is to accompany Safe Harbour,
an illustrated storybook for children who
have been bereaved by suicide.



“We can be a safety net for our children.
If we can be open to talk and listen to
each other, it can bring a sense of safety
back into our world.”

Parent



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info@nosp.ie



For a downloadable version of the
Safe Harbour storybook and this guide,
and to access the Safe Harbour podcast,
audiobook, worksheets, and other helpful
information, scan the QR code or visit
www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour

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“We want to protect our children from pain and keep them safe, so talking about a death by suicide is scary. However, being honest with my children showed them that they could trust me.”

Parent

About Safe Harbour

Safe Harbour is an illustrated storybook for children who have been bereaved by suicide. It has been developed by bereavement experts (professionals and people with lived experience) to help a child with their grief by encouraging conversation and developing their understanding of death and suicide.

Safe Harbour is a story told by a young child whose Dad has died by suicide. It contains words and illustrations that a child can relate to, and that describe what that journey was like for them.

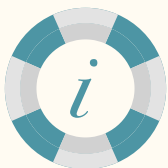
This guide is to help you—as a parent or carer—to use Safe Harbour to open up conversations about suicide bereavement with your child.



When someone close to you dies by suicide (or suspected suicide), everything can feel overwhelming. The death can affect individuals, families and communities in lots of different ways, and at different times. As a parent or carer, you might find it difficult to tell your child about what has happened or to talk with them about suicide.

Although talking about suicide with a child can feel hard, it is safe to do so. These conversations might feel daunting at first, and you might feel nervous. However, this practical guide can support you to find the right language and it offers examples of how to talk about some of the challenging themes in a way that your child will understand.

It is completely normal to want to protect your child from any pain or distress, but it's also important to be honest with them. Being honest can mean that your child is more likely to talk to you about their concerns and feelings—not just now, but also in the future. Sensitive, truthful, and reassuring responses that are suitable for the age and level of understanding of each child will support them to grieve in their own way.



You can find more details about the background to Safe Harbour, and additional support information at www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour

You can find helpful information on language and suicide at www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/resources/language-and-suicide/

The use of storybooks along with accompanying guidance is proven to help parents or carers to have conversations with their children. Using Safe Harbour with your child can:

- » Provide you with the opportunity to have a conversation about death and suicide with your child.
- » Give you the confidence to provide information and answer questions about death and suicide, to avoid confusion and misinformation, and ensure your child has a clear understanding of what has happened.
- » Help you and your child to recognise and acknowledge the range of emotions your child may be feeling, and to reassure you both that they are normal and valid.
- » Reassure your child that suicide is nobody's fault.
- » Reassure your child that you and others are open and available to listen, and encourage them to ask for help when they need it.

Reading storybooks with children can also allow for repetition. Repetition can help a child to take in difficult subjects like a death or suicide. Children seldom hear difficult information just once and fully take it in. The conversation about suicide is ongoing. As children get older they may look for additional or more detailed information. Telling and retelling can help a child to process things at their own pace and make sense of a death.

Note:

- Safe Harbour should be read with a child in a one-to-one setting.
- It is not recommended that Safe Harbour is read in group settings with children.
- Safe Harbour can also be used by professionals with children, with their parents' consent.

“In the beginning I told my daughter a different story. While it was easier at the time, I regretted it. Later, I revisited the conversation and told her the truth. She was grateful to know the truth and it was a relief for me to be able to talk openly and honestly about what happened.”

Parent

When to use Safe Harbour

As a parent/carer, you may not know what level of information to give a child or when to give it, when a person has died by suicide. The information in this guide can help you to make these decisions and find a time that feels right for you.

Safe Harbour can be used to explain suicide to your child at the time of the death, or at another time soon after. It can also be used later, if other explanations about the death have previously been given to your child. It is never too late to explain. It is always possible to go back to the subject in the future to explain more or clarify things.

You could say something like:

You know I told you that Dad died from a heart attack? Well, I'd now like to tell you a bit more about it. When he died, it was hard to explain exactly what happened and it was hard for me to find the words. But now I'd like to tell you more about how your Dad died.

Giving facts is important. Children who are not given information about what has happened may start to fill in the blanks themselves, and might create stories in their own head. They may get misleading information from other sources, or may in the future learn about what happened from people outside of their family (for example, at school, on the internet, on social media, or in the news).

Without the facts, children can have an inaccurate understanding of what happened. This can result in confusion and anxiety for the child, and a greater challenge for parents/carers in unpicking that understanding in future. Also, when children aren't given the facts openly, they might feel that they cannot ask questions or be open themselves, and then are left holding things in on their own.

Most children want to be told what has happened by those closest to them—people who they love and trust.



“The overwhelming feelings that accompany the loss of a loved one to suicide can leave us feeling completely devastated. Small things like talking to someone, meeting others who have been bereaved, spending time in nature, taking time to rest can bring some comfort.”

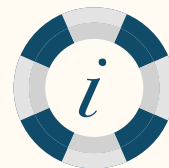
Parent

Minding yourself

How you grieve is unique to you. Each person will be affected in their own way because everyone is different—even in the same family. You have your own relationship with the person who has died, your own experience of other losses, and different levels of support. You also have your own way of showing your feelings. Some people find it helpful to share, while others find it hard to cry and to put into words how they are feeling.

When someone dies suddenly, you can be left with a mix of feelings and thoughts that can sometimes be overwhelming. You may feel some (or none) of the following: shock, numbness, disbelief, guilt, anger, relief, deep sadness, confusion, rejection, betrayal, denial, emptiness, shame, blame, and acceptance. The depth of feeling associated with grieving can affect all parts of your being: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Grief is hard work. It uses up energy and can leave you feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. Try to nurture yourself on your grief journey. Be patient, kind and gentle with yourself.

- » Try not to be too hard on yourself. Do not feel like you need to have all the answers or be the expert.
- » This will be a painful time for you too, and you need to look after yourself so that you can support your child. You may have as many questions as your child—that is OK. However, be reassured that you still have a very important role to play.
- » Grief can come in waves. You may experience intense emotions that suddenly wash over you. These waves can be triggered by memories and events, making grief unpredictable. Over time, the frequency and intensity of these waves may change but this will be unique to everyone.
- » Expect some physical reactions to your grief, such as headaches, loss of appetite, and inability to sleep. Rest when you can.
- » Find a good listener with whom you can share, and do not be afraid to reach out for help if you need it.
- » Over time and with the right support, it is possible to find hope, healing and a new normal.



Information and advice on coping with grief after bereavement, and how to support others: www.hse.ie/grief

The National Suicide Bereavement Support Guide, [You Are Not Alone: Support for people who have been bereaved by suicide.](#)

“Having her grandparents in the room, while telling my daughter her father had died, psychologically re-enforced the support that was around her without ever having to point it out. I felt reassured that they were there as back up in case I got overwhelmed with emotion, and it was also good that they could hear the exact words I used to tell her what happened.”

Parent

Guiding you through Safe Harbour

As a parent/carer, take some time to prepare yourself for reading Safe Harbour, or to have a conversation about death and suicide with your child. Try to familiarise yourself with the storybook and the information in this guide before reading Safe Harbour with your child. It might be helpful to talk through the content with another adult first.

When reading Safe Harbour with your child, there are many opportunities for you to pause, reflect, and discuss the words and pictures. To assist with this, the content of Safe Harbour is outlined in this section. Pages from the book are accompanied by themes, key messages, advice on using the words and pictures, and other information on supporting your child. This will help you guide the conversation, know what to say, or how to answer questions from a child.

Before reading Safe Harbour with your child:

- » Start with yourself. Ask yourself if you feel able to have this conversation with your child today. If you are not able, you can try again another day.
- » If you do feel able, prepare a quiet and private place if you can. Somewhere that is familiar to your child and where they can feel safe and comfortable.
- » Try to minimise distractions and ensure you have enough time to spend with them.
- » Tell your child that the book is about another child whose loved one has died, and ask them if they would like to read it with you. Take their lead; they will let you know if they are ready.



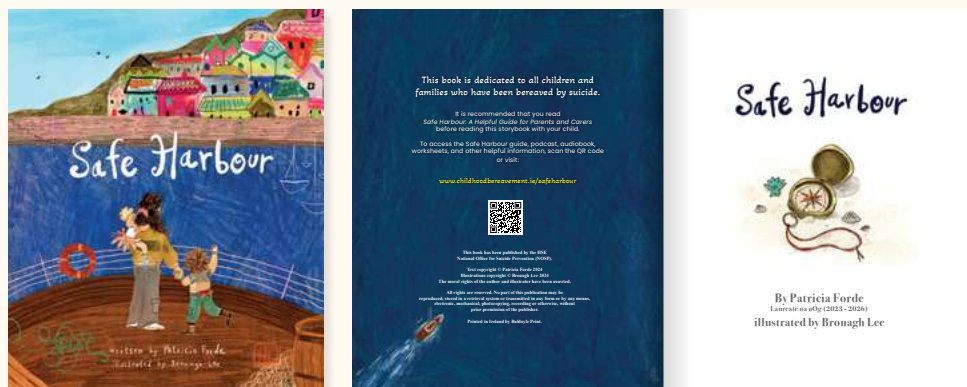
While reading Safe Harbour with your child:

- » Look out for your child's reactions and emotions and check in with them regularly to see if they are OK to continue. If you think your child is overwhelmed it is OK to put the book away.
- » Make regular eye contact. This can be an easy way to reassure your child that they are safe, and that you are fully engaged with them.
- » Mirror facial expressions and reflect back what they have said. This is another way to reaffirm that you are actively engaged and listening to them.
- » Have a familiar blanket or soft toy if this will offer additional comfort to your child, especially if it is an item connected with the person who has died.

Note:

- Your child may not want to read Safe Harbour and that is OK. You can still use the information in this guide to support you to have a conversation with them about death and suicide.

Getting started...



Safe Harbour is about a family—referred to as the ‘crew’—who are navigating their ship through life when something ‘terrible happens’. One of their crew dies by suicide.

A child (who could be a girl or a boy) tells the story. They tell the story of what their journey was like after the death of their Dad.

If it is not your child’s Dad who has died by suicide, you can still use Safe Harbour. Explain to your child that this book is about a Dad who has died, but you can adapt it to be about your loved one. You can change the names of the characters or read and discuss it in your own family context.



To help with personalising the book there is a ‘Remembering’ photo frame at the beginning of the book where you can place a picture of your loved one. You might find it helpful to personalise this page with your child before reading the book so they can think about their loved one throughout.

Safe Harbour is nautically themed.

The 'safe harbour', the 'ship' and the 'sea' feature throughout.



The safe harbour: this represents a place of safety and stability that can protect people or ships from turbulent weather. You can use the image of a safe harbour to convey the idea that despite storms or tough times in life, we can be guided to much calmer places. These are safe places where our support systems are.



The ship: this could represent your own home environment or a support network. It reflects the idea of people coming together to cope and stay afloat during difficult times, which are characterised by scenes of stormy weather. The ship can change course when needed and remain steadfast when navigating towards the safety of calmer waters.



The sea: both rough and calm seas are featured throughout Safe Harbour. The rough sea is characterised by crashing waves, dark skies and unpredictable currents. It represents difficulties and obstacles that people often face in life. The calm sea is characterised by gentle waves and is a peaceful place. It symbolises how a person might find more stability and emotional balance. The contrast between the rough and calm seas highlights the ups and downs of life, reminding us that we will encounter both difficulties and moments of calm on a journey.

“This is a really hard topic to talk about with children. Being able to use the pictures and words in the book like rough and calm seas, the crew, the SOS, can help make it easier for a child to understand.”

Parent

Our ship, our crew...



*“Our home was our ship,
and we were the crew”*

As a parent/carer you might explore the idea of a ship with your child—to talk about your own home and what home means to you both. Home may or may not be a physical place for you. It could represent the feeling of belonging that you get from being with your family, your friends, or even your pets.



“Naming each person in our family as well as extended family and friends helped me and the children to be aware of the many people that were there to help and support us during this difficult time.”

Parent

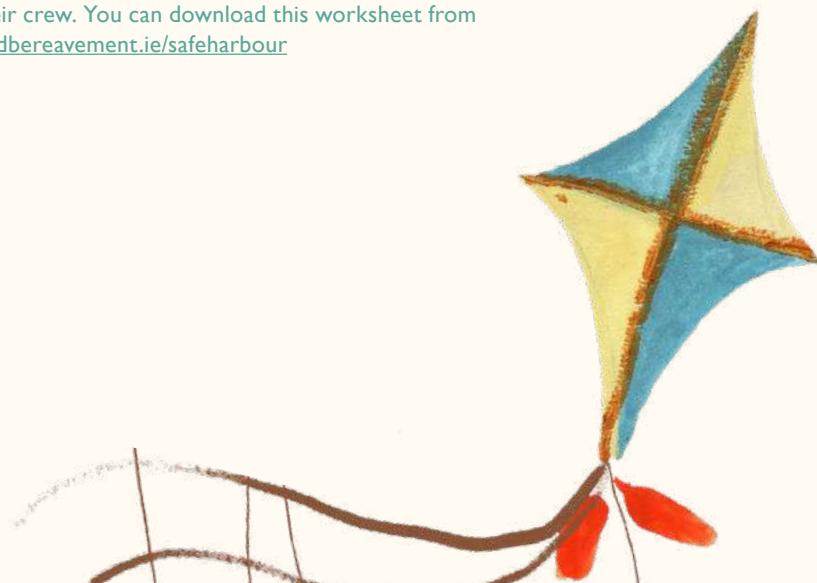
On these pages of Safe Harbour, the child introduces their family (their crew) before a death has happened. Their family includes extended family, grandparents, aunt, uncle, cousins, and even pets and animals. There are some pirates, a parrot, cats, and other people under the table. They appear at different points throughout the book and are there to highlight the importance of people being present in our lives, particularly at times when we have experienced a death. Members of a crew can always help each other out when they need to navigate a ship, and families can pull together when times are tough.

These images can be used to help develop the conversation about you and your child's own crew. See if your child can spot the various members of the crew in the book. Pause to ask your child to identify their own crew, and reflect on this. Even if your child has a small family (or if there is just the two of you in the crew), it's important that your child knows and can identify the person or people in their life who are there to support them.

Reassure your child that they have a support system and that there are people there to help them through their grief. It might also help to reassure them that they do not have to be worried about you, and that you have other adults to support you.



You can use the worksheet 'My Crew' with your child to help them name their crew. You can download this worksheet from www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour



Good and bad days...



These pages in Safe Harbour introduce the child's sibling Lucy, and reflect on sharing some good and bad days with their family.

Your child may not have other siblings, or their sibling could be the person who has died. Only remain on this section if it is applicable to your own circumstances.

Sibling relationships are important following any bereavement. Children who have experienced the same bereavement as their sibling, can offer each other unique support and understanding. They could also share with each other unique memories and experiences of their deceased loved one. Encourage your children to talk about these memories. In doing so, they can help each other to maintain their bonds with the person, after they have died (see section 'We'll think of him...' page 30).

If you have more than one child, it is important to consider their different ages. When talking about a death by suicide, children of different ages will need the same basic information, but with different levels of complexity. It is also important to remember that each family member will cope with grief in different ways.

A child's age and development stage influence how they understand and react to grief. Grief changes as children get older: their understanding of death increases as they mature, and they may need to revisit their grief again over the years. It can surprise adults when children talk or become upset about a loss that might have happened years earlier, when the child was much younger. It is natural for them to revisit the loss when they develop a better ability to understand it. For more information on how children understand death, their reactions and suggestions on what you can do to provide support, see 'Grief Reactions and Responses' page 40.

For children of all ages, being open about a death by suicide will help everyone to develop a common understanding of what has happened. This will help avoid secrets among siblings and other family members, which could undermine trust and communication. Sharing the facts can help create an environment where family members can openly express their feelings and seek comfort from one another.

This section also provides an opportunity for you, as a parent/carer, to take some time with your child to reflect on your family and the good and bad days you experienced together. A child whose loved one has died by suicide may have noticed some changes in the person's behaviour prior to their death, or may have noticed that they had days that were difficult to navigate. You can explore this further with them if you feel it is appropriate to do so.

Then, one day...



“Then one day, something terrible happened. Our Dad died.”

These pages in *Safe Harbour* illustrate the child with their family after the death of their Dad. This is the first time in the book that suicide is mentioned. The child in *Safe Harbour* does not know what suicide means, and fills in the blanks using their own imagination.

“Was it a monster, or terrible weather?”

Telling your child that a loved one has died is an incredibly difficult task. Telling them that the person died by suicide is even harder. Remember, it is better to tell your child what happened in a way they will understand. Telling children the facts does not necessarily mean sharing all the details about the death at once. You can give them the information as-and-when they can understand it. Talking to a child about death and suicide is discussed in more detail in the next section.

The image of the family together may also prompt some reflection on funerals and services. If you have not yet had a funeral or service for your loved one, you could use this image to talk through what your child will experience at a funeral—who will be there and what will happen. If the funeral has already taken place, you could discuss their reflections of the experience and what emotions they had felt.

Your child might not have attended a funeral or service, or such a service may not have been possible. In these instances, a different ceremony (such as going to the grave or creating your own memorial) can give your child a chance to say goodbye in their own way (see section ‘We’ll think of him...’ page 30).

And Mum said that suicide means...



These pages in Safe Harbour illustrate the child's Mum explaining to them what death and suicide are.

As a parent/carer, you can approach talking with your child about death and suicide in stages, each one adding a new level of understanding and building on what they may already know. These stages are meant as a guideline only. You may not go through all of these stages, or in the order suggested in the initial conversation, and that is OK.

These stages could include:

1. Telling your child that their loved one has died.
2. Giving some brief information about when and where they died.
3. Telling your child that their loved one died by suicide— what it is and why it happened or may have happened.

Stage 1: Telling your child that their loved one has died.

When telling your child that their loved one has died, it is important to use clear language.

You could say something like:

Something really sad has happened, Daddy died today.

Using unclear words such as 'gone to sleep', 'lost', or 'with the angels' can confuse a child. It may sound harsh, but using words like 'dead' or 'has died' are less likely to lead to misunderstandings.

Young children do not usually understand that death is final or that all living things die, and may expect that the person will come back. It is important that they know that death is permanent, to avoid any confusion.

You could say something like:

Everybody in the whole world will die someday. Dying means that the body stops working and the person cannot be alive again: this means that they cannot walk, talk, move, breathe, feel or think anymore. They can't come back to life even though we might want them to.



Stage 2: Giving some brief information about when and where they died.

Give general details about how the death occurred. This could be information about where their loved one was when they died, when they died, or who found them.

You could say something like:

Dad died yesterday. He died in his car.

or

Mam died this morning. She died at home.

This allows the child to begin to understand what happened.

Too many details can overwhelm a child, but if we leave out too much, children tend to fill in the blanks from their imagination.



Stage 3: Telling your child that their loved one died by suicide—what it is and why it happened or may have happened.

Remember that children do not have the same understanding as adults of what suicide is or what it means. However, they do need to know what has happened in a factual and consistent way, so they can feel safe and so they can properly grieve for their loved one.

To get started, you could ask your child to tell you, in their own words, their understanding of what has happened. Try not to interrupt or to correct them at this stage. Just listen, or explore what they have told you when they have finished talking.

This will give you a view into their world and into their understanding. Listen carefully to your child. You could repeat back what they have said to show that you have heard them. It will also give you a starting point from which to offer more information, and an opportunity to ask your child if they would like to know more.

You could say something like:

So you know that your Dad died, I'd like to tell you a bit more about what I've learned about what happened, if that's OK?

“My daughter was young, so her way of understanding was to ask me the same questions over and over again. Her questions also changed over the years. It required lots of patience and strength and ultimately, helped me in accepting it too.”

Parent

If your child does not know what ‘suicide’ means, or they do not yet know their loved one died by suicide, you can start to open this conversation. It is important that you explain to the child that their loved one intended to die and that a death by suicide is not the same as a natural death that typically results from natural causes, old age, or accidents. The key difference to communicate to your child is the deliberate action taken in suicide as opposed to the non-intentional nature of other deaths.

You could say something like:

There are different ways that people can die. Some people get very sick, some people have accidents and other people die of old age. Daddy thought that he could not live anymore so he decided to do something to his stop his body from working. He stopped breathing, his heart stopped beating and he cannot be alive again. When people decide to die like this there is a word for it—it is called suicide.

Your child may ask why their loved one decided to die by suicide. It is OK to tell your child that you do not have all the answers but you will tell them what you do know.

“So I asked mum and she said that she didn’t have all the answers, that no-one really did.”

When describing why their loved one may have died by suicide, try to avoid using phrases like ‘too many worries’ or ‘too many sad thoughts’. This may lead a child to compare their worries or sad thoughts to what was happening for the person. It is important to let your child know that the person’s death was due to an intense and overwhelming emotional pain that made them think they couldn’t live anymore.

“But for Dad it seems that huge waves of sad thoughts got stuck in his head—stuck like barnacles to rocks.”

Whenever your child hears new or difficult information like this, it is important to pause to take a breath, and to observe your child and their response to this new information. They may start to ask questions, they might curl up and cry, they might tell you to stop, or they might look frozen. All these responses are OK, and all are normal reactions to shock (emotions and reactions are discussed in more detail in the next section).

Your child will let you know when (or if) they are ready for more information. You can follow your child's lead here, and there is no immediate rush. Once the information to date has been factual, your child can choose when they feel ready for more information or detail later.

Questions from your child

At all stages, encourage your child to ask questions whenever they need to. Be guided by your child—if they ask questions, they are usually ready for the answer. Let them know that they can come back to you at any time if they would like to ask more. This conversation will be revisited many times as your child gets older.

Your child might have some big questions that you do not have a definite answer to. You might feel unable to provide answers, or feel too emotionally fragile to answer. If you do not have an answer, are worried about saying the wrong thing, or even if your child asks at a time that is difficult for you, then it is OK to give yourself some breathing space to reflect or check things out.

You could say something like:

I think that's an important question. Let me think about it and I will answer you later.



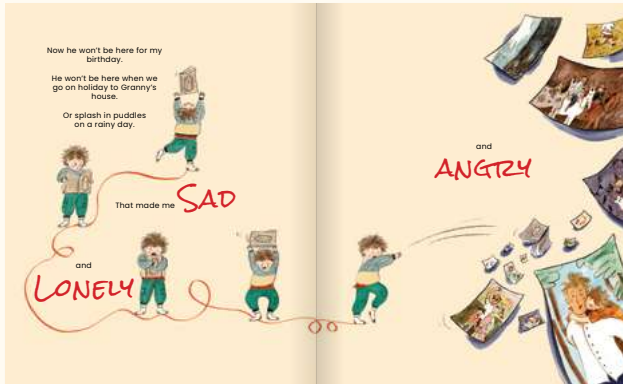


Your child might also ask many different questions over time. Or they might ask the same questions repeatedly and seek repetition or clarification. This is normal and it can help your child to process what they have heard and start to understand what it means for them.

Children often ask big questions or experience big feelings at times when there are fewer distractions: for example, at bedtime, when feelings of loneliness and loss can be stronger. For parents/carers, this can be a tiring time to try to answer painful questions, especially when dealing with your own grief.

Conversations like this can be difficult, but afterwards you may feel relieved that you could provide your child with honest information and that you have created space for your child to talk to you. Do what you can to comfort yourself and your child. It might be nice to cuddle clothing worn by your loved one, or to have a photo under your child's pillow. Remember that supporting a child and developing their understanding of what happened is ongoing.

Sad, lonely, angry...



These pages in *Safe Harbour* illustrate the child experiencing a range of emotions following the death of their Dad. This could be an opportunity to pause and talk to your own child, about their own emotions and reactions to the death of their loved one.

Like adults, children can experience a wide variety of emotions following a death by suicide, including shock, numbness, disbelief, anger, sadness, relief, guilt, confusion, betrayal, denial, shame, or blame.

Children will experience grief in different ways. It is common for children to have a range of emotions and show different reactions as they move through the grieving process over time. For example, at times a child might be very visibly upset, but at other times, seem very quiet or withdrawn or may seem happy and carefree. They might be angry sometimes or have more frequent outbursts than usual. How a child expresses their emotions, and the reactions they have, will vary depending on their age, developmental stage, and individual personality.

Help your child to understand that the emotions portrayed in the storybook belong to the character in the book, and that they may feel some, none, or all of these emotions.

You could say something like:

The child in the storybook feels sad, lonely and angry. Everyone feels differently when a person they love dies. Would you like to talk about how you are feeling?

As a parent/carer you can:

- » Reassure your child that their varied feelings at different times are all normal and OK.

You could say something like:

It is ok to feel sad or angry. It can be very hard when someone we love dies. Everyone feels differently and can show how they feel in different ways. I'm here to support you and help you however you are feeling.

- » Keep regular routines as best you can. For example at mealtimes, bedtime and other activities.
- » Focus on things that are familiar and comforting for your child, such as favourite foods, meals, songs, nurse rhymes, reading, or hobbies. Revisiting activities that remind your child of their loved one who has died, can also help.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to know if your child's emotions and reactions are 'normal' and to be expected. Remember there is no 'normal' way to grieve, but you might notice significant changes in your child over time that cause you concern. If your child's emotions and reactions are getting more intense or prolonged over time, or if you have any particular worries about their behaviour and the impact of their grief on their day-to-day functioning, there are services that can help.



For information on services that can help visit
www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour



You can use the worksheet 'Showing and Sharing Feelings' with your child to help them name and talk about their feelings. You can download this worksheet from
www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour

- See page 40 for more information on Grief Reactions and Responses

“My children showed different emotions at the time. One child cried loudly and was very sad while her sister went quiet and didn't say very much at all, she seemed lonely. I spent time with them both and reassured them that how they were feeling was a normal reaction to what had happened and that they were expressing similar emotions in different ways. I wanted to make sure that they knew that their reactions were OK and understandable.”

Parent

Maybe it was my fault...



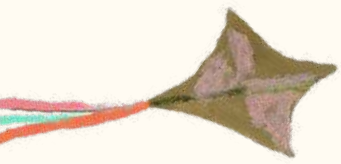
These pages in Safe Harbour illustrate the difficult time the child is experiencing, as they question if they had a role in the death of their loved one, which is not uncommon for children and young people.

After a loved one has died by suicide, a child's world might feel like it has turned upside down and they might feel shaken, unsafe and confused. In trying to understand why their loved one died by suicide, children could think that they were to blame or that they did something wrong. They might say this out loud, or they might keep these thoughts to themselves. Children will need lots of reassurance that the death was not their fault.

As a parent/carer, you can give your child lots of continued reassurance that the death was no one's fault.

Explain that it is normal to search for answers to try to understand why this happened. However, the only person who really knew why, is the person who has died. You could use the words in Safe Harbour:

"It's no one's fault. Dad was confused. The fog got in his head. He didn't ask for help or send an SOS."



- » Tell your child that you do not know the answers to some of their questions, if you need to.
- » Explore with your child what you believe and ask them what they think.
- » Remember that grief can come in waves. Try to encourage your child to let their emotions out. Check in with them regularly and let them know it is OK to talk anytime. anytime (see the calming breath activity on page 33).

These pages in Safe Harbour also feature a lighthouse, a lifeboat and a reference to an 'SOS'. An SOS is usually a distress signal used by people who are having difficulties to ask for help. The Gran in Safe Harbour says that Dad

“didn’t ask for help or send an SOS”

and that

“he didn’t know that there were people there all the time to help him, to launch the lifeboat, to bring him to safety.”

This is an opportunity to discuss with your child the importance of asking for help when things seem difficult. You could agree a plan with your child about how they can send their own 'SOS' whenever they need to talk or need help.

It is also common for children to worry about other family members after someone has died. They may worry that you could die as well. When children share their worries, it can increase their sense of connection with loved ones and encourage them to ask for help.. Reassure your child that you are here and that, no matter what, they will be loved and cared for. Highlight the supportive people who are there to help—for example family, friends, teachers—and emphasise that talking openly about feelings is better than keeping them hidden inside.



You can use the worksheet 'My SOS Plan' to develop a plan with your child so they know when, who and how to ask for help. You can download this worksheet from www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour

We'll think of him...



These pages in Safe Harbour illustrate the family being together, flying kites and at the beach. These are activities and places that remind the child of their Dad.

When a loved one has died by suicide, people can become overwhelmed by how they died, and find it difficult to remember how they lived. Your child may need support and encouragement to talk about how their loved one lived. It is normal in grief to want to stay connected to the person who died. Supporting this connection allows children to talk openly and may help them to heal.



When someone has died, this is sometimes called 'continuing the bonds of love': a process where bereaved people can integrate a loved one's memory into their ongoing lives. These bonds help people to invite joy, hope, and meaning into their days, even amid deep sorrow and pain.

“Some of my children like to look at photos while others prefer to talk about memories and tell stories.”

Parent

Talk to your child about their memories of fun times with their loved one. Ask them if there are particular things they would like to do to remember them. As a parent/carer, you can do some simple things to help your child do this, and to help them stay connected to their loved one. The following are some examples:

- » Personalise this book, using your loved one's name at the beginning, and adapting any parts of the story to your own circumstances.
- » Talk about some of the things that your child enjoyed doing with the person who has died. Reassure your child that you can still do some of those things as a family.
- » Create a memory box. You can use any box to fill with nice things that remind your child of the person who died. For example, photos, drawings, the person's belongings—or any other items that help your child to remember and stay connected with them.
- » Create a memory garden or space indoors or outdoors. It could include painted rocks, pressed flowers, drawings, or photos, and can be added to over time. This could be a place for your child to visit from time to time and think about or remember your loved one.
- » Talk about what your loved one liked to do. What music did they like to listen to? What are the good memories you and your child have with the person? What was their favourite meal or hobby? Perhaps you can continue these in their memory.
- » Write your loved one's name in the sand, if you are at a beach.

Remember, crying together as you remember your loved one is normal. Tears, love and memories can all go together.



You can use the worksheet 'My Memory Treasure Chest' with your child to help them record memories of their loved one. You can download this worksheet from www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour

Take a breath...



These pages in Safe Harbour show the child relaxing with their family at the beach. This represents a time where they can 'take a breath': to take some time out, pause and do some calming activities together.

After a loved one has died, your child may become anxious from time to time. Knowing how to calm themselves by doing calming activities can help. Children can learn these skills by watching others, and repeating and practicing the activities.

“The impact and grief from suicide can leave us feeling so many things, including feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. It is so important to find different ways that can help us to calm ourselves, to catch our breath, to give our bodies some space to breathe too. Learning calming activities can help us to find moments of calm away from the intensity of our grief. We are ‘mirrors’ to our children, and we can ‘mirror’ helpful calming exercises to them.”

Parent

As a parent/carer you can introduce calming activities into daily routines and practice them together with your child. Your child can gradually start to use these skills more and more by themselves. This takes time and patience, as they learn and grow. You and your child can learn together. Your influence, support and guidance are important.

The following is an example of a calming breath activity that might be helpful.

Anchor

- » **Basis:** Our breath is always our anchor, wherever we are, and in whatever we are doing. To have a calming effect, it is important that our 'out' breath is **longer** than our 'in' breath.
- » **Practice:** Sit comfortably. Take a moment to notice your breath. Breathe in the sea air and slowly blow it out. We can blow out the air by making a whooshing noise (like the sound of a wave). We can even say the word *whooooooooo-ssshhhhh* as we breathe out. Gently and playfully see how long you can make this sound for, before it seems like you have no air left to blow out.
- » **Daily:** In moments throughout the day, you can show your child how you are practicing this anchoring skill by exaggerating the sound of your 'out' breath like the whooshing sound of a wave. This can draw their attention to you using this skill and prompt them to give it a go.



You can do lots of other calming activities with your child.
For more activities visit www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour

We love you Dad...



This picture in Safe Harbour shows the child saying that they love their Dad, even though he is gone. The child's Mum has reminded them

"... that even though Dad's body didn't work anymore his love stayed with us"

and

"Dad's love will always be part of us."

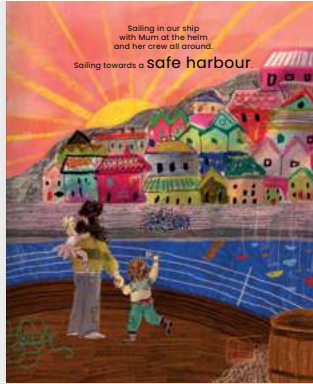
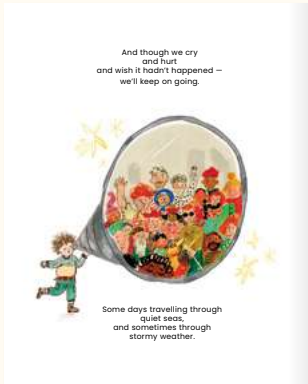
As a parent/carer, it is always important to remind and reassure your child that, although their loved one died, their love still remains.

"We love you dad"

You could say something like:

There are lots of things we don't know, but we do know that Dad loved us, and we loved Dad. He will always be important in our lives, and we can always remember all the good times we had together.

Sailing towards a Safe Harbour...



Nearing the end of the book, these pages in *Safe Harbour* illustrate the family being together and being guided to the shore, towards a safe harbour and their community. The child is looking through their telescope and can see their community waiting for them at the shore.

These pages represent how, after a tragedy such as the death of a loved one, having a strong sense of togetherness and community can be protective. A supportive community, whether it includes one person or several, can provide comfort, understanding and hope.



“With your guidance, other people in your community can provide important sources of support and information for your child.”

Parent

As a parent/carer you could take this opportunity with your child to reflect on what the Safe Harbour and the community mean to them. You have already discussed your 'crew', so you could take this opportunity to identify other people in their community (for example, teachers, friends, childminders, sports coaches, etc.) who may be important sources of support for your child. Talk to your child about why these people are important.

If you have identified some key people in your child's community, it can also be helpful to talk to those people yourself. You could let them know what you have told your child and the words that are suitable to use with your child. You could also share the information in this guide with them. Other people outside your family will often welcome practical suggestions and advice on supporting a person who has been bereaved by suicide. Talking to other adults in your child's life can help you, and your child, to cope with grief.

Some children many want to tell their friends about what happened and that is OK. You can help them to prepare what to say.

They could say something like:

My Dad died by suicide because he was dealing with an overwhelming sadness, it is not easy to talk about sometimes. But his love is always with me.

My Dad died, some of what happened is hard to talk about, but it is called suicide when they stop their body from working.

Let your child know that they can choose how much they want to share. You can talk to them about how they might answer questions from people outside the family. Let them know that some people outside the family might not know how to respond, or might say the wrong thing.

Closing the book for now...



As you come to the end of Safe Harbour, it is important to allow yourself and your child some space and time to be together and to reflect. You can:

- » Reassure your child that it is OK if they would like to talk more now, or if they would prefer not to talk more right now. You know your child best so if you feel they have had enough for now, suggest that you can talk again later.
- » Ask your child about their feelings and thoughts now that you have finished the book. Remind them that all these feelings and thoughts are valid.
- » Offer your child comfort and reassurance if they seem upset. Remember, it is OK for them to see you cry and it is normal for you to cry together.
- » Name and reflect back on some of the important key people you talked about when reading Safe Harbour—for example your own 'crew' and others in your community.
- » Remind your child that you are always available to answer questions in the future—and that even though it might be difficult to find answers, you would still prefer them to ask.
- » Let your child know that you are available when (or if) they would like to read Safe Harbour again or revisit any part of the book in the future. Let them know that if any of the content from Safe Harbour is playing on their mind in the next while, they can and should talk to you about it. Remind them about their SOS plan, and to always ask for help when they need it.

After you read Safe Harbour, and when it feels right, you can gently bring your child back into the present moment and talk about what you would like to do for the rest of the day, or tomorrow. You can take the lead from your child, and consider doing something together that you will enjoy.

Remember that the main aims of reading Safe Harbour with your child are to:

1. Open up and have some safe conversations with your child.
2. Ensure your child starts to get an understanding of death and suicide that is appropriate for their age.
3. Acknowledge and validate your child's feelings and emotions and let them know that it's OK to feel how they do at different times.
4. Confirm that a death by suicide is nobody's fault.
5. Let your child know who they can talk to (including yourself) and that they can turn to those people at any time.



After closing the book, you might feel like you have achieved all, some, or none of these aims. Try not to put pressure on yourself. Grief is a journey, and everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time. Your child will likely want more information and continued support and reassurance over the days, weeks, months and years ahead. The important thing for now is that you have created a safe space for you and your child to start to navigate these difficult times together.

Whatever your journey, it is important to mind yourself, and look after your own self-care and wellness. Caring for yourself will help you to support your child during this difficult time. Remember that additional information and support is available for you and your child. You can find more information on grief, bereavement, and supporting your child—including when might be the right time to seek additional support—from the Safe Harbour webpage, and additional websites listed below.



www.childhoodbereavement.ie/safeharbour

www.hse.ie/grief

“ It has been 6 years since her Dad died by suicide and she is coping well. She is very caring towards other children and has an understanding of grief that is beyond her years. Although it is sad that she had to have this experience so young, sometimes I see it as a strength in her. She is happy most of the time, does well in school and has lots of friends. We have a close relationship and I believe that this is a lot to do with how open and honest I was with her about her Dad’s death. ”

Parent

Grief Reactions and Responses

A death by suicide can be experienced as a traumatic event by those close to the person. Children will experience their loss and their grief in very different ways.

The following table looks at children's understanding of death and the typical challenges and reactions, and offers some suggestions of ways in which their trusted adults can be supportive.

Age/Developmental Stage & Understanding	Reactions	How to support
0-4 Infants, Toddlers and Pre-school Children * Children do not fully understand death. They don't realise death is permanent and will happen to everyone. It's important they know that the person has died, is not simply 'asleep', and that they will not return.	Although babies, toddlers and preschool children may not understand the concept of death, they may sense the person's absence and pick up on the distress of those around them. They may become withdrawn or have loud outbursts of crying or display clinginess to others. Also some regression in relation to toilet training, sleep routine, soother or thumb sucking may occur.	Maintain their routine as much as possible to reassure them. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Play familiar music and games. » Keep regular mealtimes and prepare favourite foods. » Give extra time to comfort when necessary. » Encourage asking questions and answer as honestly as you can. » Continuing memories—photo albums and creating memory boxes are a great way to do this. » Encouraging asking for help—come up with ways that your child can indicate when they need support or reassurance. You can role model this too. » Create time and space for immediate family to reassure the child after losing a significant person.
4-8 Young Primary School * Children of this age gradually learn that death is final and that all living things will die at some time.	Initial shock may be followed by very little reaction. Some children may experience night terrors, trouble sleeping, tears, separation anxiety, repeating the same questions and may expect the person who has died to come back.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » As with younger ages continue to encourage asking questions, continuing memories, asking for help and reassurance. » Be factual about what has happened. Children don't need to know every detail but giving them facts will help them build and maintain trust. » Use the words 'died' and 'dead' to help them understand that the person is not coming back. » Explain rituals as they are happening and include children where possible. » Children may regress (want to sleep in carer's bed, look for extra comfort). » Let staff in their school and clubs know what has happened as they may form part of the child's wider circle of support.

Age/Developmental Stage & Understanding	Reactions	How to support
9-12 Older Primary School * Children at this age have the capacity to understand death can have different causes and impacts on the people around them.	At this stage expect a lot of specific questions about how and why the person died and could it have been prevented. As they understand more about the permanence of death they may be deeply shocked, afraid and angry. They may not want to participate in games and sports with their peers as enjoyment may seem disloyal to their loved one. They may also avoid talking about the person who has died.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » As with younger ages, continue to encourage asking questions, continuing memories, asking for help and reassurance. » Create a culture in the home that all questions are OK even if you don't have all of the answers. » Make time as a family to remember your loved one. » Support the development of friendships and the exploration of new activities making sure that schools and clubs are aware of what happened and how they can support. » Acknowledge the difficult transition from primary to secondary school without their loved one and also celebrate the achievement with them. » Remind children that the additional challenges they experience as a result of grief are not their fault.
13+ Secondary School/ Young People * This age group understands that death is irreversible, universal, and has a cause.	<p>Teenagers are already coping with changes that come with moving to secondary school and puberty. Generally they will respond to the death in ways that are recognisable in their personality (if usually anxious may become more worried, if they usually anger easily they may express anger towards their unfair loss). On the other hand some teens may react in a way that is opposite to how they usually are (an outgoing teen may become withdrawn).</p> <p>Frustration, anger, a sense of great unfairness, being overwhelmed, and anxiety are all emotions that could be said to be common features of both adolescence and of grieving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » As with younger ages, continue to encourage asking questions, continuing memories, asking for help and reassurance. » Processing grief whilst also experiencing significant developmental shifts can be intense—this is a challenge, but also normal, so try to be patient and understanding. » Show how normal it is for grief to come and go. It can catch us off guard and it is OK and normal to get emotional and feel very sad. It is also OK to experience moments of joy, laugh at funny memories. » Ask questions and listen more than giving guidance. Ask what might be helpful for them, don't assume. » Have realistic expectations of performance and grades which may fluctuate for a period of time following the death. Ensure that school staff are aware of what has happened so that they can also have realistic expectations and provide support. » Remind self-critical teens that the extra challenge of grieving, in addition to coping with the challenges of being a teen, is not their fault. » Give them time to see their friends as peers – this can be an important source of support. » Regularly offer opportunities to talk to you without putting too much pressure on them to do so.

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Safe Harbour was written by Patricia Forde and illustrated by Bronagh Lee.

The content in Safe Harbour and this accompanying guide was developed by:

Project Group

Niamh Crudden (HSE Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention Dublin South, Kildare, West Wicklow), Maura Keating (Co-ordinator Irish Childhood Bereavement Network), Niamh McGuinness (HSE Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention Dublin South, Kildare, West Wicklow), Oliver Skehan (National Suicide Bereavement Support Coordinator NOSP), Brid Enright (Publishing Consultant), Ciaran Austin (Communications Manager NOSP).

Advisory Group

Dr Philip Dodd (Clinical advisor NOSP), Gina Cantillion (Barnardos Bereavement Co-Ordinator), Fiona Tuomey (CEO HUGG), Carmel Crowe (Co-ordinator Suicide Bereavement Liaison Service Pieta) Pauline Cahillane (Suicide Bereavement Liaison Officer Pieta).

Other contributors include:

Dr Stephanie O'Connor (Clinical Psychologist), Brian Lanigan (Editor), Andy Gaffney (Audiobook and Podcast Producer), Jordanne Jones (Audiobook narrator), Róisín Adams (Irish Translation).

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Notes

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