



## The WHALE Study Family Newsletter November | 7<sup>th</sup> | 2022



### *Supporting children through sadness*

This newsletter talks about a new part of the WHALE study where we will be doing a fourth visit to learn how children learn about death from their families. Here we talk about that and offer some guidance. Children first begin to understand what death is between ages 5 and 7. It's normal for children to ask about death and what happens after death, and to do imaginative play involving death as they learn about this new concept.

However, new research suggests that children in the U.S. may be having thoughts about self-harm and suicide earlier than previously thought. While we used to think these thoughts only occurred during adolescence, we now realize we need to learn more about what is happening developmentally at younger ages. Members of our lab received money from the National Institutes of Health to better understand what is developmentally typical and atypical at this age, and when it might be important to intervene. Suicide research experts, Drs. Adam Miller and Caroline Oppenheimer, will be leading our WHALE team in asking a number of families to participate in a fourth WHALE study visit to further research how to best discuss these issues with young children.

If you worry that your child is thinking much more than other children about death, is much more sad than other children, or is expressing that they wish they were dead, you'll want to keep them safe. Here's what we know so far about managing risk with young children. Parents can ask their young children if they have ever had thoughts of hurting themselves or wishing they were dead. Asking these questions is not dangerous; opening these conversations allows your child to trust you and feel safe talking about this heavy topic.

If your child makes a comment about hurting themselves or wanting to die it's likely that they're dealing with emotions that feel unmanageable to them. Helping them find ways of coping with their emotions is your best course of action. Validating their feelings and offering safe ways to manage these difficult emotions can help children learn to cope with their discomfort. However, these thoughts can become actions, a concern which is more likely when kids are older (e.g., older than 8). Regardless of age, you should take your child seriously. You can start with phrases like these to better understand what they are feeling: "What's wrong? How can I help?" or "You can always talk to me about how you feel. We will get through this together."

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Check out the page below for **community resources!**

Click [here](#) to tell us what topics you want covered in future newsletters!



If your child is *frequently* talking about death and saying life is too hard, expressing people would be better off without them, or they don't want to live anymore, [reach out for help](#). You can look up child and family psychologists in your area, or reach out to our WHALE team to get help finding resources near you. A therapist can help your family develop a safety plan, which includes helpful ways of responding when children have intense emotions or thoughts about hurting themselves, such as positive activities they can do to get through the moment, and adults they trust to share how they are feeling. **Let your child know you will get through this together.**

The best and easiest safety measure you can implement for any child with these thoughts is making your home environment safe. This can also help reduce accidents. For example, if there is a gun or firearm in your home, it is essential these weapons remain unloaded, locked, and kept out of reach of children at all times.

**If you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts, dial 988 for the national Suicide and Crisis Line or report to the local emergency room.**

## RELATED RESOURCES

If your family experienced the loss of a loved one, please reference [our previous newsletter on talking to children about death and loss](#), as well as [this piece by NPR with tips adapted from Dr. Rosemarie Truglio](#), a developmental psychologist and Senior VP of curriculum and content at *Sesame Workshop*.

If your family knows someone who died by suicide, this conversation may feel more complicated. Here are some tips adapted from the [Hunstman Mental Health Institute](#):

- **Keep it simple** when discussing suicide with young children. Content will vary depending on the child's experiences and understanding. Asking your child what they already know allows you to correct misinformation and enter the conversation where they are.
- **Honesty is best** but *follow the lead of the child and answer their questions with short yet concrete answers, careful not to over-explain details that might be hard for young children to hear.*

More resources on talking about suicide with kids from [On Our Sleeves](#) and [Ele's Place](#)

## COMMUNITY RESOURCES

### HOUSING

- [Durham Continuum of Care \(CoC\)](#)
- Eviction Information: 216-965-5095
- [Durham Rescue Mission](#)
  - 919-688-9641
- [Orange County Partnership to End Homelessness](#)
- [Urban Ministries of Durham](#)
- [Durham County Social Services](#)
- [Orange County Social Services](#)
- [Wake County Social Services](#)

### FOOD & GROCERIES

- [Wake County Public Schools Free Meals](#)
- [Durham County Public Schools Free Meals](#)
- [Orange County Food Resources](#)
- [Chapel Hill/Carrboro Schools](#)
- [TABLE](#)
- [Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina](#)
- [Wake County Food Resources](#)
- [No Kid Hungry NC](#) - Text FOODNC or COMIDA to 877-877 to receive information about 3 drive-thru or pickup sites with meals for kids closest to you

More community resources can be found on our website: [circlelab.unc.edu](http://circlelab.unc.edu)