

**Talking with Your Child about Suicide**

There are a number of key points to consider and reiterate when talking with children about suicide:

* Start by asking what they already know and what they think. Be curious and ask how they have learned what they have learned. This shows that you are invested in having a conversation and not just interested in talking at them.
* Remind them that suicide is permanent. Unlike the characters in fiction, when someone ends their own life, there is no turning back, no sending out messages to people from beyond the grave, and no chance to see how others may feel once you are gone. Life’s struggles may seem overwhelming, but you will work together to help get them some relief if they are ever struggling. Let them know that you love them and are there for them.
* Suicide is never a heroic or romantic act. Despite how it may be portrayed on television, it is always a tragedy.
* Memorializing someone who has died by suicide is not a recommended practice. While that person will be sorely missed, decorating lockers or taking selfies in front of such memorials does not honor the person who died and can send mixed messages to others who may be struggling.
* Knowledge of someone else’s pain and struggles can provide the incentive to get help. It is critical that when kids become aware that another child may be struggling that they actively seek help for that peer. Encourage them to talk with a trusted adult, even if they are concerned that their peer will be angry with them. Once the struggling peer is feeling better, they may come to realize that the support they received was because someone else cared for them.
* If you are concerned that your child may be thinking about attempting suicide, then ask them directly (as calmly as you can) if they are having such thoughts. See below for “What to do if you are worried that your child may be suicidal.”

**What to do if you are worried that your child may be having thoughts of suicide**

* Ask your child if they are okay. Know that starting the conversation and showing your genuine concern is often the hardest part. As parents, we want to believe that our children are okay, resilient when faced with life challenges, and capable of solving difficult situations. We need to believe that our parenting has resulted in competent and effective decision makers, and it can be overwhelming and shame producing to consider that our children are not well. As much as teenagers have a tendency to push parents out of their lives, when they are struggling, kids need their parents more than ever.
* Let them know why you are concerned. Assume that they will tell you they are fine, but remember that your initial instinct suggested a need to be concerned. Your child may try to keep their life private from you as a way to assert their independence, but do not hesitate to let them know that you’ve been paying attention and care enough to follow up. For example, “I know you are saying that you are fine, but I’ve been worried. You are spending less time with your friends, didn’t try out for your favorite sports team, and haven’t been turning in your school work. You haven’t seemed like yourself lately, so I just wanted to check in. How are you doing?”
* Directly ask them about suicidal thoughts and behaviors. While many people express fears about asking this question, research has consistently found that asking someone if they are thinking about suicide does not increase their risk. In fact, acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce, rather than increase, suicidal thoughts. “Many people who are depressed or struggling with a lot of things consider taking their own lives, is this something that you are thinking about?”
* Listen attentively and non-judgmentally. A parent’s instinct is to solve a child’s problem when they are hurting, and often times those solutions involve giving advice and telling our children what to do. Remember that sometimes our children need us to just listen and not solve everything in that moment. Avoid telling your child that “everything will be okay.” As much as we want to believe it to be true, in the moment of crisis, many teens cannot see that their problems will work out. It’s more important to be inquisitive and thoughtful in our listening. “Could you tell me some more about that?”
* Reflect what they are sharing and let them know they have been heard. Solving a child’s problems with our own suggestions fails to validate the child’s experience, and they don’t feel like they were heard. Instead, reflect back to them what you are hearing them say, and then check in to make sure you have heard it the way they intended it to be heard. When our children know that we are not only listening, but also hearing and understanding the message, they are more likely to share more. Remember, avoid the temptation to solve the problem right now.
* Let them know they are not alone. Thoughts of suicide can produce many negative feelings, such as shame and fear. These feelings, among others, lead to feelings of isolation, which may further lead to keeping these feelings secret from others. Helping children realize that they no longer own these feelings all to themselves may make them feel very vulnerable; however, sharing can often lead to a great sense of relief when the listener remains attentive. Remind your child that you are available for them and will do everything you can to help them find relief.
* Let them know that effective treatments are available. Suicidal individuals often spend countless hours trying to solve whatever challenge is facing them. Because they are not feeling better, they may begin to feel hopeless that nothing can help. Know that many years of research and development have led to a number of different treatment approaches that have been shown to help people who are suicidal. Get to know mental health professionals in your community or talk to someone at school. Don’t be afraid to ask potential treatment providers about their experience working with suicidal youth and their use of best practices in the field. You want to make sure that your child gets the best care possible. And remember, school counselors are far more helpful and effective than the school counselor depicted in Season 1 of *13 Reasons Why*.
* Get them to professional help. Resist the temptation to just solve this at home. Remember that when our children our struggling, they may need support beyond what we can offer. It’s okay to need help from time to time. This does not make you a bad parent. This makes you a parent who loves your child. And if you are concerned that they may be at imminent risk, do not leave them alone and call a local crisis emergency line.