



Talking About Mental Health & Suicide With Your Child

One of the most enduring myths surrounding suicide is that talking about it will persuade, or force the idea, when in fact it is just the opposite. There have been numerous studies refuting this myth indicating that talking about suicide within the context of a supportive and caring relationship is not harmful. It opens up a difficult, albeit, necessary dialogue.

- Go to a comfortable place (e.g. sit on the couch, take a walk, go on a drive together)
- Pay close attention
- Expand their thinking by asking hard questions
- *Show* youth how to ask for help when they need it
- Learn from youth - they have a lot to teach us

It's normal to feel nervous or uncomfortable. Before starting a conversation, take a few deep breaths and give yourself enough time to process your own emotions.

Key Points Parents & Caregivers Should Know

Talking about mental health and suicide can feel uncomfortable. You don't need to have all the answers. **Be honest, listen, and keep the conversation open.** What your child needs most is to know that they can come to you.

WHAT IS SUICIDE?

- **Use clear, direct language.** Avoid euphemisms such as “passed away” or “went to sleep.”
- Suicide means **a person dies by suicide, or intentionally ends their own life.**
- Suicide is **complex.** There is rarely one reason or one event that causes someone to consider suicide.
- Mental health challenges can be a factor, but **not everyone who experiences mental health challenges thinks about suicide.**
- People experiencing emotional pain may feel hopeless or believe that things will never get better.
- **Help is available, and people can feel better with the right support.**

You might say:

“It can be difficult to understand why someone would die by suicide. People may be experiencing emotional pain or other struggles that make it hard for them to see a way forward. There is help for people who are struggling.”

AGES 3-6 Keep It Simple

Young children need **short, concrete answers**. Give information in small pieces and let their questions guide the conversation.

- Use simple, honest language.
- Answer only the question your child is asking.
- Reassure your child that **they are loved and cared for**.
- Explain that sometimes people have problems with their **feelings, thoughts, or mental health**, just as people can have problems with their bodies.
- Let your child know that **grown-ups can help when someone is having big or difficult feelings**.
- Children may ask the same question repeatedly. Be patient and continue to answer simply.
- Help your child identify **trusted adults they can talk to** when they have big feelings.

You might say: *“Sometimes people have very big feelings and need help from grown-ups. If you ever feel scared, sad, or overwhelmed, you can always tell me.”*

AGES 7–11– Give Honest Answers & Encourage Questions

Children in this age group may want more information and may begin asking deeper questions. **Keep answers brief, honest, and age-appropriate.**

- Use the words **“died by suicide”** or **“killed themselves.”**
- Explain that suicide usually involves **many factors**, not one person, event, or problem.
- Mental health challenges can sometimes contribute to suicidal thoughts.
- Someone who is struggling may feel **hopeless, overwhelmed, or unable to see another solution**.
- Emphasize that **many people who struggle with mental health problems get better with help**.
- Let your child know that asking for help is a **sign of strength, not weakness**.
- Identify trusted adults your child can turn to—parents, relatives, teachers, counselors, doctors, coaches, or others.
- Reassure your child that they are **loved, supported, and not alone**.

You might say:

“We may never know everything about why someone died by suicide. Usually, there isn't just one reason. When people are struggling, they may feel hopeless and unable to see a way forward. That's why it's so important to ask for help.”

AGES 12–17 Be Direct & Invite Conversation

Teens can understand more complex explanations and may have questions about mental health, suicide, and why someone might consider ending their life.

- Be **direct and honest**. Don't avoid the word suicide.
- Use language such as “**died by suicide**” or “**killed themselves**.”
- Explain that suicide is complex and usually involves **multiple factors**.
- Mental health conditions, emotional distress, trauma, relationships, life circumstances, and other factors may contribute.
- A person experiencing suicidal thoughts may feel **hopeless or trapped** and may believe that things will never improve.
- Remind your teen that **suicidal thoughts can change and that help is available**.
- Encourage reaching out to a trusted adult or mental health professional.
- Let your teen know that **you will listen without judgment**.

You might say:

“When someone is thinking about suicide, they may feel trapped or believe that their situation will never get better. Those feelings can change, and help is available. You never have to handle something like that alone.”

WHEN YOUR CHILD ASKS, “WHY?”

- We may never know exactly why someone died by suicide.
- There is **rarely one cause or one reason**.
- Mental health challenges may be part of the picture, along with many other factors.
- Someone who is struggling may feel hopeless or unable to see alternatives.
- Their thoughts and feelings at that moment **may not reflect reality**.
- Help can make a difference.
- **Suicide is preventable, and reaching out for help matters.**

You might say: “We may never know exactly why. What we do know is that people who think about suicide are often experiencing tremendous emotional pain. They need support and professional help—not blame.”

OTHER QUESTIONS YOUR CHILD MAY ASK

“How could someone who seemed happy die by suicide?”

- People don't always show what they are feeling on the inside.
- Someone may be struggling even when they seem happy or successful.
- Checking in with the people we care about is important.

“Sometimes people are very good at hiding their pain. That's why we check in with the people we love—even when they seem okay.”

“Is it someone's fault?”

- Suicide is complex and is **not caused by one person or one event**.
- Blaming someone can cause additional pain.
- Focus on understanding, compassion, and support.

“Suicide is not something we can blame on one person. There are usually many things happening in someone's life.”

“Could I die by suicide too?”

- Suicide is **not something you catch** like a cold or flu.
- Having a family member who experienced depression or died by suicide does **not mean that you will**.
- Encourage your child to talk about any worries or feelings they are having.

“Suicide isn't something you catch. If you ever have thoughts that scare you or make you feel hopeless, you can always come to me. We will get help together.”

CHECKING IN WITH YOUR CHILD

Don't Wait for the Perfect Words – Instead of trying to have one big conversation, **make checking in a regular part of family life.**

Try asking:

- “How are you really doing?”

- “Can you tell me more about what's been going on?”
- “How have you been feeling lately?”
- “Have you been feeling differently than you did a few weeks ago?”
- “What has been hardest for you?”
- “What do you need from me right now?”
- “Is there someone else you'd like to talk to?”

And remind your child:

“I'm here to listen. You don't have to handle this alone.”

WHEN TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH & SUICIDE

Remember These 5 Things:

- **BE DIRECT**
Use clear, age-appropriate language. Don't avoid difficult words.
- **LISTEN**
Give your child space to talk. You don't have to immediately fix the problem.
- **STAY CALM**
Pay attention to your child's reactions. Slow down if they seem overwhelmed or confused.
- **KEEP TALKING**
One conversation isn't enough. Continue checking in.
- **CONNECT TO HELP**
Let your child know that reaching out to a trusted adult or mental health professional is a normal and important step.

IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR CHILD

Take your child's words and behavior seriously. Ask directly about suicide if you are concerned, stay with them, and connect them with immediate professional support.

References:

www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/parents-caregivers

www.elunanetwork.org/resources

“Talking with Children About Suicide and Violent Deaths.” (Common Ground Grief Center; The Elizabeth Hospice)

- The Dougy Center, The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

- Sesame Street Workshop's When Families Grieve

Books:

After a Suicide: A Workbook for Grieving Kids

