



Talking to Your Kids About Depression and Suicide

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As a parent, you want the best for your children. You work every day to protect them from harm. Sometimes that work means you have to have some difficult, often uncomfortable conversations – including ones about suicide.

Talking to your child about suicide may be the toughest conversation you ever have, but it may also be the most important.

Why it's important to talk about depression and suicide

Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the United States for kids ages 10-19.

- Approximately 1 out of every 6 high school students has considered suicide in the past year
- Depression and suicide affect people of every race, religious background, and income level
- Kids need to know the warning signs of depression and suicide and how to get help if needed
- Most kids who attempt suicide have shown signs of depression

Parents have an essential role in educating their children about the importance of taking care of their mental health just as they would their physical health. The earlier a mental health issue is identified, the sooner effective treatment and recovery can begin.

Research is very clear that talking about suicide does not give your child ideas about trying it or increase the risk of a suicide attempt in the future. Talking about suicide shows your child that you are concerned and want to help.

Even if your child is not depressed, it is important to have direct conversations about mental health and how friends may be dealing with these issues. Some of the following are good ways to start a conversation:

- Do you ever get sad or lonely? What do you do to make yourself feel better?
- Do you or your friends ever talk about hurting yourselves or not wanting to live anymore?
- How would you handle it if you knew someone who was talking about hurting themselves?

If your child has been thinking about suicide, he/she is likely to be relieved that you brought up the topic. It is essential that you ask directly about depression and suicide if you notice any of the following warning signs:

- Feeling down or hopeless
- Increasing use of alcohol or drugs
- Major changes in sleep, eating, or activity level
- Stopping normal activities
- Withdrawing from friends or family
- Suddenly giving away possessions
- Making comments about “wishing to be dead” or being a “burden” to others
- Preoccupation with suicide or dying in writing, drawing, or online activity
- Looking for the means to kill oneself (e.g. gun, pills, rope) or discussing a suicide plan

How to Start the Conversation

If your child makes a comment about hurting himself/herself or wanting to die, **always** take him/her seriously. Start with these phrases to better understand what he or she is feeling:

- “What’s wrong? How can I help?”
- “Sometimes kids feel so sad or upset that they feel like hurting themselves. Have you been feeling like that?”
- “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”
- “You can always talk to me about how you feel. We will get through this together.”

By talking about suicide, you let your child know you are there for support and are open to discussing any topic, no matter how uncomfortable it is.

If your child is having suicidal thoughts, take him or her to your local emergency room immediately or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Do not leave your child alone until you see a mental health professional. Let them know you will get through this together.