



# AGE RELATED GUIDE TO TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SUICIDE

## *High School and Beyond*

Parenting comes with a lot of unexpected challenges and one of them may be having a conversation with your child about suicide risk. When to have such a conversation, and what to say exactly, can create anxiety for even the best prepared parents, so here are some guidelines that are based on a child's age and developmental abilities that can take some of the guesswork out of how to proceed.



- The first thing to remember is that you undoubtedly have experience talking with your kids about difficult topics. Whether it's why certain behaviors are unacceptable or what their feelings are about being left out of peer activities, you understand the base line: address your own feelings before you attempt to talk about theirs. When you know where you stand on a subject and how you feel about it, you can do a better job of moderating your own feelings and listening to those of your child. Understanding their point of view is essential to helping them modify their behavior or being able to consider a perspective other than their own.
- Suicide is a challenging topic for all of us but it may help to recognize suicide isn't about wanting to die - it's about facing a life problem(s) that's causing so much emotional distress your child can't effectively use their problem-solving skills to figure a better way out. Suicide seems like the only answer. This definition is important for a lot of reasons:
  - First, it makes the suicide conversation about problem-solving, not about dying, which can almost immediately give us a sense of relief.
  - No matter what their age, the key information you want to talk about with your child is what's going on in their life that has them feeling so overwhelmed, or hopeless, they wish they were dead. You're not talking with them about wanting to die, you're talking with them about the problems they're having in living. This focus makes a big difference! It sends your child the message that they're not in trouble for thinking about suicide, which is the reason many youth feel they have to keep their thoughts about it a secret. You realize they feel pretty trapped by something in their lives and, perhaps, if you put your heads together you can figure out a better way to deal with it.
  - You might initiate this conversation in relation to the suicidal behavior of one of your child's peers, and that's an easier place to start. So, if the opportunity presents itself, take advantage of it. You're not going to be suggesting suicide to them or planting the idea in their minds; you're just giving them permission to talk about a topic that many people keep secret. And even if it's a distressing topic, it's important to give your child permission to openly bring it up with you.

What are some of the guidelines for approaching this topic in a developmentally sensitive way? Take a look!

**Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, Inc. | [www.sptsusa.org](http://www.sptsusa.org)  
110 West Main Street, Freehold, NJ 07728 | [info@sptsusa.org](mailto:info@sptsusa.org) | (732) 410-7900**

## High School and Beyond

For some parents, a discussion about suicide doesn't emerge until high school, when students often have curriculum that focuses on mental health and suicide prevention. The guidelines for this conversation, however, are the same regardless of age and they follow a simple formula:



- Explain your reasons for having the conversation ["I noticed that your school is starting the Lifelines suicide prevention program and I'm curious about what you'll be learning"]
- Start by expressing your feelings on the subject ["I see more and more stories about suicide in the national news and it worries me. Is it something you and your friends talk about?"]. Then move to asking what your child's friends are saying. This lets you ease into the topic.
- Recognize your child's friends may have talked about suicide, or even made attempts, and that your own child may not be a stranger to the feelings. It doesn't mean you're a bad parent! It is simply that youth today seem more open about the topic and attach less stigma to being honest about it. Think of it this way: talking about suicide is like yelling for help when you're afraid you might be drowning - a great way to get attention without resorting to doing something self-destructive.
- If you can consider suicide as just another health risk, like seat belt safety, safe sex, alcohol and drug use- all the potential risky behaviors you have probably already talked with your kids about- the conversation simply falls into the category of promotion of healthy behaviors, not death. It's always easier to talk about something in a positive way rather than in a negative one.
- The key point you want to make with your child is that if they are worried about their own personal safety- i.e., they are having thoughts about ending their life- it's critical that they tell a trusted adult. Their friends are not equipped for this kind of lifesaving, [that's why pools and beaches have lifeguards] so they need to turn to an adult they trust. Find out who's on their list [maybe it's you] and make sure they know how to contact that person if they ever needed to get in touch in an emergency.
- Review the national suicide prevention resources. In the last few years. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number (1-800-273-8225) has been widely disseminated and a quick look on Google will bring it up as well as the National Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741-741). Walk through the process of accessing it with your kids, no matter how old they are or joke about your doing it.