



# AGE-RELATED GUIDE TO TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT SUICIDE

## *Middle School Children*

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.

## Middle School Children

Just as elementary school presents kids at very different developmental passages, so does middle school. Grade 6 is about managing the transition from elementary school while students in 7th and 8th grade are preparing for the transition to high school. Peer connections become a focus of attention, so it's productive for parents to do the best they can to monitor their child's online social activity. Keeping secrets from the adults in their lives starts to be the norm, which is why having opened some of those lines of communication in elementary school is so important. Kids start to test limits, explore risky behaviors, and may become defiant as they begin to explore their own personalities outside the boundaries of the family. A conversation about suicide with middle school students is handled best when it's not out of the blue. For example, look for an event in their lives or in the media as a way to engage them on the topic. Even if they don't seem impressed, start the conversation with an explanation about how you feel talking about suicide. "This is a tough subject for me" or "I never had to think about this when I was your age" - are introductions that make you a little vulnerable in sharing your feelings on the topic so you are modeling what you are asking them to do. You can also begin by asking if any of the kids they know have talked about suicide, which gives them a degree of emotional safety by not having to share their own feelings first. You can also explain that suicide isn't about dying as much as it is about dealing with what feels like an unsolvable life problem as a way to make the connection between suicide and impaired problem-solving skills. In addition, it's important to ask them to identify an adult they could turn to if they were worried about themselves or a friend. Recognize it might not be you due to that separation from family that was referenced a little bit ago. Swallow your disappointment with the knowledge that having a trusted adult in their lives is a critical resource for your kids as they age. In a few years, you might be back on the top of that list! What are some key points about middle school?



- Remember, asking about suicide does not plant the idea - all it does is give your child permission to talk with you about it. Middle school students are already talking about it in school, reading about it in English assignments, and are generally pretty prepared to tell you what they think about it.
- Thinking about suicide is not uncommon as kids move into adolescence; if your child goes from thinking about it to planning how they would do it, however, you need to immediately get some professional help. How do you find out that information? Ask: "I appreciate your telling me you've thought about suicide. I wonder if you're made any plans on how you would do it?"
- This conversation about suicide is imperative if someone your child knows about dies by suicide or in some other traumatic loss event. This 'exposure' to the death of a peer might naturally have them think about their own mortality, so asking the simple question: "I wonder if the death of that student had made you think about dying yourself?" is a good way to begin that conversation. Remember, these thoughts are NORMAL, so listen with an open mind!
- The school remains an important collaborative partner so if you're comfortable, share any concerns you have with them. They usually have a list of mental health professionals they can refer you to for additional support or assessment.
- Behaviors of concern that the school may report include:
  - Frequent visits to school nurse
  - Frequent restroom requests
  - Actual threats or suicide notes
  - Talking about suicide
  - Leaving school early
  - Disturbing themes in school assignments
  - Unusual pattern of absences or tardiness
  - Crying or angry outbursts in the classroom
  - Concerns expressed by other students.