

Talking About Suicide With Your Son or Daughter *Guidelines for Parents*

Parents often feel like they're "out of their league" when their son or daughter has to face the impact of suicide. Our job as parents is to protect our kids, and it is increasingly difficult to help maintain their naivety. Certainly when kids' lives are impacted by a suicide, parents struggle with what to say or not say.

Think about this. Our kids learn as much by what we don't say as by what we do say. Youth are remarkably loyal to family norms, so if you don't bring it up, they very likely will not mention it either. Often parents hope that, if their kids aren't bringing it up, maybe it isn't bothering them. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Kids need to talk about things that trouble them, and when they aren't sure adults can handle the conversation, they turn to one another. That means that the highest level of wisdom they'll have will be that of their own age group – sorely lacking in experience and insight! Those conversations are out of our view, on social media or on the bus.

A surprising number of adolescents are thinking about suicide. When we don't bring it up to them, we give them the implicit message that they ought to be handle this tough stuff themselves. Some may be worried about friends. They need us to listen!

Although your child may not be at risk of suicide, s/he may know of a peer or friend who is at risk, and often kids think that keeping the secret of that plan is a support to their suicidal friend. Nothing could be a greater misunderstanding or risk for them!

So as difficult as it is, we need to be the ones to bring the subject up for our kids. Here are some tips on how to have those discussions.

When we ask our kids how THEY are doing, it puts them on the defensive. "How are you doing?" often brings out the "OK" or "fine" sort of answer. So instead of that, try:

- *It has been in the news about the boy who died by suicide at the high school. I would imagine that there is a lot of conversation about that among students...*
- *I am thinking that there is probably a lot about that girl's suicide on Facebook...*
- *We we talked about this a little when you got home from school, but now that you've had some time to think about XXX's death (or "suicide"), what troubles you most?*
- *What are other students are thinking/saying? What worries kids about this?*
- *What does it mean to you that this happened?*

When your son or daughter responds to your question, resist the temptation to give a solution, an answer or a response that attempts to put the issue to rest or to make it OK. Instead, invite your child to go deeper into what this means to him or her. Really, at this point, the value in this discussion isn't so much for you to reassure your child as it is to learn from him or her what their thoughts, fears and concerns might be. Instead of providing an answer or solution, try to learn more about what your child is thinking or fearing. Next questions might be:



- *When things like this happen, sometimes kids don't think they should talk to adults about it. Are there adults at your school that you think students trust?*
- *Most adults hope that they won't ever have to talk about suicide with kids, so most of us haven't thought about it much. We probably don't understand how this is for you. What do you wish adults could understand about how this is for you right now?*
- *Lots of times, adults try to give answers to kids. With suicide, there are lots of answers we'll never have. I want to try hard not to just give you MY answers, but I want to help you figure out your own answers. Let me listen more.*

Realize that as soon as you put your meaning to this suicide, you've stopped listening to your child. As soon as kids sense that you want them to just believe what you believe, you can no longer be as effective in helping your child. We need to have the courage to support our children while they grapple with these difficult issues and find meaning and coping skills as they do so. This is the most difficult part for us as parents – to realize that it is more important for us to help our children navigate these difficult times and use this as a time to “grow” their own character. So instead of providing “solutions” or pat answers, you might try:

- *If there were one thing I could do to support you right now, what might that be?*
- *What have you learned from this? What should I be learning from this?*
- *What does it mean that this happened?*

Sometimes it is helpful to “make kids the experts” so we're not asking them questions directly, and they can talk about it from a general point of view. You might try:

- *I would think that lots of kids are struggling with this right now. What do you think worries them most?*
- *If you could give advice to parents of kids at your school right now, what would that be? (or) advice to the teachers at your school right now, what would that be?*

Finally, the important thing to remember is that there are always unanswered questions following a suicide. Unanswered questions related to death always make it more difficult to come to terms with the death. We really can never answer the “why” question. We want to answer why someone would do this, or why s/he would choose to do it in a particular way or in a particular place, but the truth is, we'll never know. The answers died with that person.

What we can address is that the way we get through difficult times is by supporting one another, and accepting that we each have different ideas about what the answer may be, but knowing that none of us can actually “know” the truth, so the best thing we can do is reserve judgment and suspend belief and do the most difficult part, which is allowing ourselves to live with the unanswered questions by loving and supporting one another no matter what we think. Keep checking every now and again in for weeks or months.

AND! Tell your kids in lots of different ways how much you love them; notes from you in their backpacks, a heart of syrup on their pancakes, take time to do special things...