

Hazelden Lifelines® Prevention

Starting the Conversation

Talking with your child about suicide is as important as talking about safe driving or alcohol and other drugs. However, it can be difficult to bring up this subject with your child. These are some tips for talking with your child about suicide.

1. Pick a good time. You want your child's full attention, so choose a time with minimal distractions and a reasonable degree of privacy.
2. Be conversational. Remember that your goal is to have a conversation with your child, not to deliver a lecture. It always helps to have a "reference point"—such as an event or a news story, or the school's *Lifelines Prevention* program—to start the conversation.

"I was reading in the newspaper that the rate of suicide for teens has increased ..."

"I noticed on your school's website that the teachers are attending a suicide prevention workshop ..."

3. Be honest. If this is a difficult subject for you to talk about, acknowledge it.

"You know, I never thought I'd be talking with you about suicide. It's a topic I've never been really comfortable with"

By acknowledging your discomfort, you give your child permission to acknowledge his or her discomfort, too.

4. Be direct. Ask open-ended questions to clarify your child's responses. *"Tell me how you feel talking about suicide."*

"What do you think about suicide?"

"What have you learned about suicide in school?"

5. Listen to what your child has to say. You've brought up the topic. You're interested in his or her responses, so simply listen to your child's answers. Don't interrupt or interject your opinion unless asked.
6. Ask questions. If you hear something that worries you, ask for more information. *"You say that one of your friends has talked about suicide. Tell me more."*
7. Open the door to revisit the conversation. Suicide isn't a onetime discussion topic. When you've made it okay to talk about suicide, it should be easier to bring up again. If you've heard something that concerns you, make sure to ask about it again.

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Addressing Behaviors That Concern You

As parents, you play a crucial role in suicide prevention. You know your child's moods and behaviors better than anyone else. If certain behaviors concern you, it's important to take these worries seriously. Here are guidelines for addressing worrisome behaviors with your child:

Don't worry about overreacting. Sit with your child and let him or her know about your concerns. ("You said something that worries me" or "You don't seem to be yourself lately.")

Be specific about your concerns. ("I've noticed you aren't spending as much time with your friends, and you seem annoyed when they call you" or "You spend hours doing your homework, but every time I check on you, you're just staring into space" or "Your teacher called and said you're failing English because you're late to class almost every day.")

Expect your child to discount your concerns. ("All the kids are having trouble getting homework finished" or "My friends are annoying" or "That teacher fails everybody.") Explain that you're not concerned about everybody in the class. You are concerned about your child. Be prepared to offer more than one example; the more evidence you have, the harder it will be for your child to minimize your examples.

If your child says anything that even hints at thoughts of suicide, ask about it. For example, statements like "Sometimes I'm not sure life is worth living" or "I just can't take much more" *must* be explored further! *You cannot plant the idea of suicide in your child's mind by asking about it!* In asking about thoughts of suicide, you open the lines of communication and introduce the idea of help-seeking behavior by asking to hear more about your child's distressing thoughts.

Act immediately if you have concerns about suicide. Get your child to a mental health professional as soon as possible for an evaluation. There are several ways to do this. Refer to the list of local resources you received from the school.

Whatever resource you choose, indicate the urgency of the situation. Make sure to use the phrase "at risk for suicide." ("I'm concerned that my son may be at risk for suicide, and I'd like to schedule an evaluation as soon as possible.") Although the evaluation might determine that your child is not at immediate risk for suicide, this is an assessment you'd like to have made quickly, and it is a decision that is best left to a trained mental health professional.