

Talking to school-aged children about suicide

School-agers: Ages 6-11

When they say: “What is suicide?”

Don’t say: “Oh, you never mind that.”

Say: “Suicide happens when someone gets very depressed, which is like being sad time 100 without a break. It hurts a lot, and it makes a person want to stop the hurt, and the only way he thinks he can is to stop living.”

Because: There is a good chance that word of the suicide will get around, and if you don’t talk with the child about it, he may hear about it at school or at the funeral or at the next family get-together. Worse yet, he may get the message that he shouldn’t talk about the death. He needs to hear about the suicide from you first. That way you can do your best to welcome questions and openly accept his intense feelings. Hiding just causes shame- something he doesn’t need on top of all he is sorting through right now. And if he asks questions about how the person died by suicide? Answer them, straightforwardly and honestly.

When they say: “It doesn’t make sense. He seemed fine the last time we saw him.”

Don’t say: “Well, I guess we should have checked in with him more.”

Say: “It’s true. He was laughing and was even playing football with you guys. Even though he looked happy on the outside, he was experiencing something difficult on the inside. We couldn’t help because we didn’t know.”

Because: Suicide causes a lot of confusion. Your child naturally wants to figure it out. Allow him to do it in his own way. He may need to chew on it a while and try to understand it through thinking, talking, and playing.

When they say: “I just wish everyone would stop talking about it!”

Don’t say: “How can we stop when it is all we can think of? We have to talk about it.”

Say: “It sounds like we need a break from talking about _____’s suicide. Let’s plan a little get-away and go camping the weekend and focus on having fun.”

Because: She is expressing that she is overwhelmed with the suicide and needs a mental and emotional break from it. Children grieve in “doses” and can only let in so much pain at a time. Honor this desire to step out of it for a while. Show her the other side of life-that joy and fun still exist. She also might be overwhelmed by the details of what happened, feeling like she isn’t old enough to handle them. The next time it’s being discussed, ask her if she wants to stay and hear or leave the room. Also, planning time in nature provides a space of calmness and helps reset us when we are overwhelmed.

When they say: “I miss him so much.”

Don't say: “I know, but you need to let him go.”

OR

“What's done is done. We can't change it so we better just move on.”

Say: “I know what you are feeling. I miss him too. Sometimes, I miss him so much I feel like I might explode. Do you ever feel that way?”

Because: The child's grief cannot be rushed. He will need many opportunities to feel, and express, his grief. While it may seem like remembering him will only cause pain, don't forget that pain is healing. He can't go around grief, he must go through it. Give him many chances to express his grief through words, crying, actions, ceremony, and play.

Excerpt from:

Finding the Words

How to talk with children and teens about death, suicide, funerals, homicide, cremation and other end-of-life matters.

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