



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

## *Elementary-Aged 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.

## Talking With Children In Elementary School

Elementary school encompasses a wide range of ages and developmental skills. Many kids will struggle with separation from home in those early years and the support and caretaking of their teachers will be important in helping them make a successful transition to the larger world. This is also why getting input from the school if you're worried about your child is so important. A child's problem-solving skills are developing although they remain concrete, which is one of the reasons something like suicide, which is a concrete action, can get incorporated into their thinking as a way to fix life challenges. Young children may be preoccupied with superheroes and believe they possess the same powers which can also contribute to unrealistic problem-solving suggestions. Unfortunately, improving problem solving skills may also be compromised by the hormonal bursts that accompany the onset of puberty, especially for girls, which often begins long before girls have the emotional maturity to manage their physical changes.



Although suicide risk is increasing with kids in this age group, more often than not, an expression that "I want to die" reflects those life problems that feel insurmountable. That's why asking younger children to complete the sentence: I want to die because.... can give you vital information about what in their life seems overwhelming. It is also very useful, as we said before, to involve your school if you are concerned about your child. Even if you have experience with more than one child, the staff at your child's school can compare your child's behavior to the rest of their classmates and are usually pretty good at distinguishing 'typical' behaviors from those that should concern you.

### So, what are the key points with elementary school kids?



- Asking about suicide will not plant the idea in your child's mind.
- You can substitute 'taking your life' or 'thinking you'd be better off dead' for the word suicide if these other expressions are more comfortable to you.
- Ask them to complete the sentence: "I want to die because..." as a way to help both you and your child get some insight about what their problems really are.
- Get input from the teachers at your child's school. They see your child in relation to their peers and usually have a good idea of the behaviors that are concerning.