



PARENT AWARENESS SERIES:

When A Friend Of Your Child Attempts Suicide

This is one of those questions we wish our children would never need to ask! Unfortunately, even in elementary school, kids seem to be hearing about suicide and if they ask us about it, we may not be quite sure what to say to them.

The place for parents to start is with some basic understanding of suicide itself. Just the word "suicide" can be so frightening that we can't imagine that there might be a way to comprehend it, let alone talk about it. But if we put our fear aside and begin to think about suicide in a different way - for example, as the ultimate solution to a problem someone feels they just can't solve in any other way - it may begin to make a little more sense. In addition to thinking that suicide is the solution to that problem, the suicidal person is usually in a 'crisis mode' of thinking. What that means is that the feelings of panic and emotional pain they are experiencing have affected their ability to problem solve in a productive way. Life crises, big or small, affect most of us in negative ways - shift us into 'fight, flight, or freeze' positions that are often extreme and unhelpful. On top of that, suicidal thinking also has an irrational quality. Somehow, the idea of death feels like the only logical way to solve the problem. And, as you probably have already learned from parenting experiences, it's nearly impossible to help someone who is being irrational understand the flaws in their logic. Finally, suicide can feel like the only way to send a message to someone - normal channels of communication feel closed.

There are a couple of other things to know about suicide before we answer this mom's questions. The first is that, even an attempt can have an impact on peers. As you probably already know, kids do imitate each other's behaviors. That's why it's so important to talk to your child if you're aware of any type of potentially unsafe behavior with their peers. You'd raise the topic if you learned that friends of your child were drinking or using drugs or doing other dangerous things - well, suicide is no different. Which brings us to the last important thing to understand about suicide: asking about suicide can't plant the idea in someone's head. In fact, it can have the opposite effect - it gives your child permission and opportunity to talk about something that's probably very upsetting - and it opens that door of communication that may have felt closed!

"My daughter came home from school yesterday and told me that one of her friends has been hospitalized for making a suicide attempt. Another student in her class was hospitalized for an attempt about 3 months ago. As a parent, I'm worried about the effect these attempts might have on my daughter. Will they make her think about suicide too? What do I say when she asks me why they would do something like this?"

- Mother of 14 year old girl

So using this information as our points of reference, let's craft a response to the Mom's questions at the top of the page. See what you think of this:

1. Acknowledge the situation, express your concern and ask about your child's feelings:
"Wow, that's the second person you've known who's made a suicide attempt in the last three months. That really upsets me. How are you feeling about it?"

2. Listen to the answer, whatever it is! Be prepared for responses that range from uninterested to really concerned. And remember, there is no right way to respond. Sometimes it's hard to know what gets on a kid's radar; just by asking the question, though, you are giving your child permission to open up to you about suicide, either now or in the future.

3. Ask about the buzz in school. You want to get a sense if this is a topic of conversation:
"What are you hearing about this in school? Are the other kids or your teachers talking about it? If you hear ANYTHING that worries you, talk with me or someone at the school about your concerns."

4. Answer questions about suicide honestly. Use the information about suicide in this handout to help your child begin to think about suicide as a desperate and poor attempt at problem solving. Explain that people who think that suicide can solve their problems aren't thinking clearly. Try to think of an example that conveys the irrational element of suicidal thinking and will capture your child's attention:

"It would be like you got a pair of shoes that didn't fit and instead of taking them back to the store, you cut off your toes to make the shoes fit."

Make it clear that no matter how big a problem may seem, there are always other solutions.

5. Ask if the exposure to these attempts has made your child have thoughts about suicide, too:

"I've heard that sometimes being exposed to the suicide attempts of peers can make other kids think about suicide themselves. Have you had any thoughts about suicide? Tell me what they are."

Most of the time you'll get a negative response to this question. If your child does admit to thinking about suicide, however, it's important to ask the series of questions that are outlined on the "Talking about Suicide With your Child " handout available on the SPTS website, www.sptsusa.org. It's also important to revisit this topic if you notice any changes in your child's behavior that concern you or when there are any changes in school. For example, in the example given above, you'd want to revisit this conversation with your child when her hospitalized friend returns to the classroom.

6. Always remind your children that if they have any concerns about themselves or their friends, to talk with a trusted adult. Help them create a list of adults they could confide in - and if your name isn't on the list, be cool about it. The important thing is that your child understands that adults can be allies who can help when things are tough.