HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT SUICIDE

Talking about suicide with children can feel daunting. We may fear we won't have the right words or will not be prepared to navigate the conversation. We may worry that children may feel that the death was their fault or that they could have done something to prevent it. However difficult it may seem, the truth, in most cases, is a good approach to start this conversation. Here are a few suggestions on how to talk to children about suicide.

Talk to children openly. Understanding how to talk to children about suicide is the first step to helping you feel more equipped and confident in having the discussion. Children have a good sense of when things are "off." They may observe or overhear adult conversations and begin to construct their own ideas on what happened. Without accurate information, they may create their own stories and images, which could be incorrect — or perhaps be worse than what actually happened. In most cases, it is recommended to be honest and upfront from the beginning, using age-appropriate language in alignment with the child's developmental ability. If this is a conversation that needs to be revisited due to original details that may have been based on falsehoods or incorrect information surrounding the death, it is never too late to restart a conversation based on truth. You can let children know you did the best with what you knew at the time, and, now that you have learned more information, you would like to talk about it. Still, there can be challenging circumstances where discretion would be advised; TAPS can support you with options as you decide what and when to share with your children based on your family's specific circumstances.

Keep it simple and use words that children can understand. Depending on your child's age, you might need to begin with a simple explanation of what it means to die, gently emphasizing the permanence of death. You can follow your child's lead on what they already know and start from there. It is best to be concise and avoid details on specifics of the scene or the method that was used. Be prepared to discuss questions they may ask; if your child has no questions, you can assure them that if and when they do, you will be available to talk through anything they want to discuss. Explain that you may not always have all of the answers because you may be unsure yourself, and when you know more, you can follow up on their concerns. Keep in mind that this can be an ongoing discussion to build on over time; for young children in particular, it can be a truthful pathway on the way toward knowing more as they become older. Some helpful phrases to explain what happened could include:

- *They made their body stop working.*
- *They died by suicide.*
- *They ended their life.*

It is healthy to express emotions. When you express your own emotions around your grief, it gives children permission to show their emotions as well. Grief related to suicide loss can be very difficult to navigate and can include challenging and overwhelming emotions; guilt, confusion, shame, anger, and sadness are all very common reactions. You can let them know that it's normal to feel whatever they are feeling while you model healthy ways to express and cope with those feelings. It is helpful to give permission to: talk about loved ones, express feelings, cry, exercise or go for a walk, relax or rest, or engage in a fun activity — like art, listening to music, or playing a game. You can learn to grieve as a family and create healthy ways to cope with this loss together.

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Prepare children to talk with others. Let them know that you will always be available to talk with them about their feelings and emotions, but it is also helpful to identify other safe people who will be supporters to them, such as grandparents, family members, teachers, mentors, or counselors. You can also explain there are special helpers, like doctors, that your family can talk to about difficult feelings. It may be useful to come up with prepared statements that children can use to tell people what has happened, and together you can create different responses depending on who they are talking to. For example, your child may want to plan a response if a classmate asks what happened or why they were out of school. That answer may be very different from the one used when they are asked by an adult. Planned, simple responses can make them feel more secure, prepared, and in control if they are asked tough questions. Here are a few examples:

- *I don't want to talk about it right now.*
- *I'm not ready to talk about it yet, but I am sad that my brother died.*
- *My dad died after he was hurt (or from wounds) from fighting in a war.*
- *My mom died by suicide, and we're still working on understanding it.*

Let children help craft responses that they feel comfortable with. Keep in mind that each child may grieve individually and may want to share differently (more or less) from siblings. It is important to give each child permission to talk about their loss (or not) in ways that make them comfortable, especially when talking with people outside of the family. As they grow older through developmental phases, their comfort levels around what they share may change.

Everyone grieves differently, including children. Depending on their developmental age and their personalities, children's reactions will vary. Remind your children that you are all in this together and to be respectful, patient, and kind to not just yourselves, but to each other. Talk about what you need, and the different ways that you can help and support each other. Come up with ideas on things that may (or may not) help each person individually, as grief may look and feel different to each of you.

ABOUT THE TEAM

The TAPS Suicide Prevention & Postvention department is a division of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) that addresses the challenge of suicide loss in the military, the veteran community, and across the nation. Our dedicated professionals draw from a combination of clinical expertise, survivor "lived experience," and TAPS' own best practices in peer-to-peer grief support to care for those who have lost someone to suicide. These life-saving efforts help reduce risk and prevent subsequent loss.

Visit taps.org/suicide or call 24/7, 800-959-TAPS (8277)

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