



Talking With Youth About Suicide

Talking openly about suicide does not increase risk. Calm, direct, and caring conversations reduce risk by strengthening connection, identifying concerns early, and helping kids know when and how to ask for help. Remember, kids and teens may hear about suicide from friends, school, or online—even if adults haven't discussed it yet.

Ages 5–10 years | Early Elementary

What kids are like:

- Think concretely; limited understanding of death
- Notice strong emotions but struggle to explain them
- More likely to notice concerning comments in friends
- Often tattletale — this is a protective behavior

What adults can say:

- “Sometimes kids feel really sad, mad, or overwhelmed. When that happens, it’s important to talk about it.”
- “If you ever hear a kid say they want to die or disappear or hurt themselves, tell an adult right away.”
- “You won’t get in trouble for telling — adults help keep kids safe.”
- “If you ever feel so upset that you don’t want to be here, you can always come to me.”

Ages 11–14 years | Middle School

What kids are like:

- Increased awareness of emotions and peer differences
- Strong need for peer belonging and approval
- Emotions can feel intense and confusing
- Impulse control still developing
- More exposure to suicide through peers, school, or social media

What parents can say:

- “A lot of kids your age have big feelings that can change quickly.”
- “Sometimes kids think about not wanting to be here. Have you ever felt that way?”
- “If a friend talks about wanting to die, it’s important to tell an adult.”
- “If you ever have those thoughts, I want to know so we can figure it out together.”
- “Keeping someone safe is more important than keeping a secret.”

Ages 14–18 years | Adolescents

What teens are like:

- Greater emotional insight
- Still developing impulse control
- Thoughts and feelings may be frequent and intense
- Value privacy but still need connection

What parents can say:

- “Sometimes when people feel overwhelmed, they think about dying or killing themselves.
- Have you had thoughts like that?”
- “How often have you had those thoughts?”
- “Do you ever think seriously about doing it? How?”
- “If you EVER think about wanting to die or killing yourself, I want to know so we can get you support.”
- “Keeping someone safe is more important than keeping a secret.”
- “Having these thoughts doesn’t mean someone wants to die—it often means they want the pain to stop.”

Key Messages for Parents

- Asking about suicide does not increase risk
- Listening calmly builds trust and safety
- You don’t need perfect words — presence matters, listen, connect
- When in doubt, ask directly and get help
- Kids should never handle suicide concerns on their own — adults help keep kids safe
- Asking directly is caring, not harmful
- Suicidal thoughts often mean wanting pain to stop, not wanting to die
- Keeping someone safe is more important than keeping a secret
- When in doubt, trust your instinct and get help early

If you’re concerned right now:

- Stay with your child and listen calmly
- Remember, a calm presence matters more than having the perfect words
- Ask directly about suicidal thoughts
- Contact your pediatrician, school counselor, or mental health provider
- Call/text **988** or seek emergency care in urgent situations; develop a crisis response plan