Parent Tips: Talking about suicide and depression with children

Here are tips to help parents have this important and tough chat with their children:

1. **Review the facts first.** Chances are a suicide story will be discussed at school or amongst your child’s peers, so review the story before you talk. More often than not, the stories your child hears will not be accurate and can fuel anxiety. That’s why you need to clarify the facts.

2. **Begin with a simple question or direct statement.** A few ways to start the dialogue: “Have you heard the sad news about the girls who killed themselves?” or “What are your friends saying?” or “Let’s talk about what you just saw on the news.”

3. **Be honest and direct, but careful.** Give the details your child needs to know. Withhold facts or details that are not in your child’s best interests. Be prepared for lots of questions — or none at all. Clear up any misunderstandings about suicide, depression or death that your child may have. If you don’t have an answer, just admit you don’t know and say you’ll get back with the answer. The key is to keep that conversation going!

4. **Describe depression.** “I want to talk to you about suicide and depression.”
   Your talking points might include stressing that depression is *not* a phase, nor something kids can shrug off by themselves. Depression is a serious disease that needs treatment by a medical doctor.

   To help your child see the difference between normal sadness and depression, apply the word “too” in your talk: *The sadness is too deep. The depression lasts too long or happens too often. It interferes with too many other areas of your life, such as your home, school, friends.*

   The best news is, when depression is diagnosed early and properly treated, kids almost always feel better.

   **Say to your child:** “If you ever feel so sad or scared or helpless, please come and tell me so we can work together to make things right. Depression is treatable.”

5. **Be prepared to be unprepared.** There is no way of predicting how your child will respond to such a tough subject. The key is to answer any or all questions as they emerge. Let your child know you are *always* available to listen or help.
6. **Talk about cyber-bullying.** Emphasize that you recognize bullying and cyber-bullying is a growing and serious problem. Ask how often bullying is happening at school, what the school’s bullying policy is and how safe your child feels. Stress that cyber-bullying is painful and that intentionally causing another child pain is *never* acceptable.

Use your chat as an opportunity to review your rules about Internet and cell phone usage. Talk about the dangers of posting anything that is hurtful — that there are no “take backs” and that hurtful actions can have horrific consequences.

Also, tell your child to come and tell you if he/she is ever cyber-bullied. Beware that ‘tweens’ or teens say they fear telling parents because they do not want computer privileges removed. Be careful so you do not sound too punitive. Instead, tell the child to print out the evidence and you will contact the server to change the passwords.

There are blogs that cover cyber-safety issues, with information on how to monitor your child’s online history and how to spot signs that your child is being cyber-bullied.

7. **Teach “Tattling” vs. “Reporting.”** When it comes to preventing tragedies, kids may well be the best detectors: *The majority of adolescents who commit homicide or suicide share their intentions with a peer.*

Impress on your child the importance of telling an adult any legitimate concerns with the guarantee that their report will be taken seriously. Telling an adult that someone is hurt or could get in trouble is not the same as tattling: It’s acting responsibly. Explain that reporting is not to get a friend in trouble but to help the friend stay out of trouble or harm.

8. **Discuss “safety nets.”** Identify adults that your child feels safe with, other people they can talk to when issues arise. Emphasize that people are always available to help your child and their friends with any kind of trouble.

Mention the 24-hour, confidential National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **800-784-2433** or **800-273-8255**, with trained people available who will listen and help kids any hour of any day.

**Above all, emphasize:** *“No problem is so great that it can’t be solved.”*