

How to Talk to a Child about a Suicide Attempt in Your Family



Guides for Families of Preschoolers, School Age Children and Teenagers



The mission of the Rocky Mountain MIRECC is to study suicide with the goal of reducing suicidal ideation and behaviors in the Veteran population. Towards this end, the work of the Rocky Mountain MIRECC is focused on promising clinical interventions, as well as the cognitive and neurobiological underpinnings of suicidal thoughts and behaviors that may lead to innovative prevention strategies.

Please Visit Our Website

www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/

where you will find these guides, as well as other educational resources for Veterans and their families, healthcare providers and communities.



If you feel you are in crisis, whether or not you are thinking about killing yourself, please call the Lifeline. People have called the Lifeline for help with substance abuse, economic worries, relationship and family problems, sexual orientation, illness, getting over abuse, depression, mental and physical illness, and even loneliness.

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Or use the Lifeline Chat Service:

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Are you a Veteran or concerned about one? Veterans Crisis Line

1-800-273-8255 Press 1

Or Text to:

838255

Confidential Veterans Chat:

www.veteranscrisisline.net



Preschool



How to Talk to a Preschool Child about a Suicide Attempt in Your Family

This information is intended to inform and guide adults when talking with a two to five year old child about a suicide attempt in the family. It is not intended to replace the advice of a mental health professional. In fact, it may be best to use this along with professional support if you or your child is struggling with how to talk about this difficult topic. It is important to consider your child's level of development and ability to understand events when deciding how to talk with him. Sticking to the simple facts and answering any questions he asks may be all he needs. ("Dad was feeling bad and had to go to the hospital.")

Talking to your preschooler about a suicide attempt in the family

Without the support of family or other caring adults, a young child may try to make sense of this confusing situation on his own. Children this age have magical thinking, and their own ideas about what is happening can be more frightening than the situation itself. Because preschool children do not have the vocabulary to express all their thoughts and feelings, they may act out at times. Small children, when stressed, may exhibit changes in behavior, such as temper tantrums. They may also have trouble sleeping, and may become clingy because they are feeling insecure, anxious, or fearful. Younger children are self-interested by nature, and so they may blame themselves and feel guilty because they think they have caused the problem. Children this age will need lots of reassurance from you, and a sense that problems can be solved. It is important to instill a sense of hope that their parent/relative, while struggling, can get help and get well.

When should you talk to your preschooler?

- If your child was exposed to the crisis and traumatized, he will need some basic understanding of what happened.
- If your child was elsewhere and not exposed, consider what he needs to know to make sense of the changes happening in his life.
- The goal is not to overwhelm the child with information, but to answer questions in a calm, non-judgmental way, so he is not afraid to ask more questions.

If you notice that your child is unusually withdrawn, tearful, or depressed, seek professional help or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For additional resources and information for families about suicide, visit: www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/ or www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/.

How should you talk with your child?

- Choose a place that is private and comfortable, where your child will feel free to talk. Also be aware of what she may overhear from other conversations about a family member's suicide attempt.
- Understand that young children may only be able to deal with a little bit of information at a time, and may ask more questions over time.
- Keep it simple and use words that your child will understand. Be honest and direct, but do not provide more details than the child needs. Let her responses and questions guide you when deciding how much information to provide.
- Be aware of your own feelings and how you are coming across. For example, your child could mistake an angry tone of voice to mean that you are angry with her. A calm, gentle tone will help her feel safe to open up to you.
- Ask your child age-appropriate questions, and allow her to freely express even difficult or uncomfortable emotions without judgment.
- Small children may express their feelings or fears through make believe play. If your child can't express her questions directly, consider spending play time together. She can practice expressing her feelings in other ways, through art, music and other forms of expression.
- Reading books or stories may make it easier for small children to express themselves, indirectly, by identifying with the characters. "How do you think the bunny rabbit felt when he got lost in the woods?"

Ways to support your very young child:

- By continuing certain dependable, daily routines even in a difficult time, you can help your child feel cared for and safe. For instance, if you pick your child up at the end of the work or school day, continue to do so if possible. Calming bedtime rituals, such as a bath or reading time will be even more important to your child now.
- While providing stability, also remain flexible to a child's emotional needs during a disruptive time.
- Get other support people involved (family, friends or clergy). This will benefit you, and in turn benefit your child.
- Very young children receive special comfort from physical as well as verbal expressions of affection, such as hugs. Offer extra support and attention during this time (examples: games, reading together, physical closeness).
- As the parent/relative who has been hospitalized becomes more stable, consider if it would be helpful to offer your child a chance to visit him in the hospital.
- Preschool children are very sensitive to the emotional state of their caregivers. Caregivers should try to care for their own emotions, including grieving privately when possible, and concentrate on the child's needs when together.
- Show your child that her day-to-day life will remain stable, and that her basic needs will continue to be met.





Throughout this difficult time, reassure your child that you will continue to take care of him and that he is safe. Let him know that he can come to you with concerns and questions at any time and expect that he may have more questions when he is older.

Consider suggesting a special activity to keep him active or involved with a project. Creative expression (drawing or coloring, and other types of play) as well as some physical activities may help him express his feelings.

What to say to your child

Try to:

Start with his understanding of the situation

Describe what has happened depending on his grasp of the situation. Make sure to use simple language, providing only as much detail as needed to answer his questions.

Respond with more information if your child indicates a greater level of awareness or asks more questions.

Inform him about emotional struggles.

Address guilt, blame, shame, and responsibility.

Assure him that his family member is getting treatment/care.

Let him know that his daily routine will stay the same.

Encourage him to express his feelings, and to know that his feelings are normal and expected.

Ask if he has any questions.

Help create a connection between your child and his family member. Tell him when he can expect to see his family member again.

Allow him not to talk if he desires, and to choose who he talks to.

Let him know you are getting support too.

Examples:

“I want to talk to you about what happened with Dad. What do you remember from last night?”

“Mom is in the hospital because she is not feeling well.”

“Your sister was feeling very sad and hurt herself.”

“Grandpa has been feeling very sad lately.”

“I want you to know that this is not anyone’s fault.”

“Dad is in the hospital getting help.”

“Even though it is different that Mom is not here, you will still go to daycare/pre-school tomorrow.”

“How are you feeling? This can be hard to talk about. Would you like to draw a picture of your feelings?”

“Do you have any questions about what happened with Grandpa?”

“Your brother will be in the hospital for a few days until he feels better. Would you like to draw a picture for him while he is there?”

“If you don’t want to talk about it now, that’s okay. We can talk about it later, or you can talk to Grandma, too.”

“We have lots of friends and relatives who are helping us.”

School Age



How to Talk to a School Age Child about a Suicide Attempt in Your Family

This information is intended to help inform and guide adults when talking with a six to twelve year old child about a suicide attempt in the family. It is not intended to replace the advice of a mental health professional. In fact, it may be best to use this along with professional support if you or your child is struggling with how to talk about this difficult topic. It is important to consider your child's level of development and ability to understand events when deciding how to talk with her. Sticking to the key issues and answering her questions may be all she needs. ("Dad was feeling bad enough that he didn't want to live, so he had to go to the hospital for help.")

Talking to your school age child about a suicide attempt in the family

It is important to talk to your child about the suicide attempt to help her understand what has happened. Without support of family/friends, children may try to make sense of this confusing situation themselves. Sometimes children blame themselves for something they may or may not have done. When stressed, a child may exhibit changes in behavior, such as acting out, trouble sleeping, or becoming more attached due to insecure, anxious or tearful feelings. It is important to instill a sense of hope, that their parent/relative can get help and get well.

When should you talk to your school age child?

- If your child was exposed to the crisis and traumatized, she will need some basic understanding of what happened.
- If your child was elsewhere and not exposed, consider what she needs to know to make sense of the changes in her life.
- The goal is not to overwhelm your child with information, but to answer questions in a calm, non-judgmental way, so she is not afraid to ask more questions.
- If marriage or family problems contributed to a suicide attempt, avoid details that would put your child in the middle, between parents or other family members.

If you notice that your child is unusually withdrawn, tearful, or depressed, seek professional help or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For additional resources and information for families about suicide, visit: www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/ or www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/.


How should you talk to your child?

- Pick a place that is private where your child will feel free to talk. Be aware of what she may overhear from other conversations.
- Keep it simple. Use words your child will understand and avoid unnecessary details. Invite her to ask questions.
- Be aware of your own feelings and how you are coming across. For example, your child could mistake an angry tone of voice to mean that you are angry with her.
- Ask your child age-appropriate questions, and allow her to freely express even difficult or uncomfortable emotions without judgment.

Other ways to support your child:

- By continuing certain, dependable daily routines even in a difficult time, you can help your child feel cared for and safe. For instance, rituals such as picking her up from school, having dinner together and the usual bedtime routine can help reassure her and make her feel safe.
- Get other support people involved (family, friends or clergy). This will benefit you and in turn benefit your child. School age children can also begin to learn caring for themselves during stressful times by paying special attention to good sleep, eating and physical habits.
- School age children also receive special comfort from physical as well as verbal expressions of affection, such as hugs. Offer extra support and attention during this time (such as games, reading together and physical closeness).
- Children of school age, particularly as they approach the teen years will benefit from knowing that they play a valuable role in the family, and can contribute by helping with chores, participating in family volunteer activities, or helping to plan a family member's return from the hospital.
- As the parent/relative who has been hospitalized becomes stable, visiting him in the hospital, and attending a family therapy session with a mental health professional could be quite helpful and reassuring.
- Consider coordinating with your child's school by notifying a school counselor or trusted teacher about the situation so that they may support your child and be alert for any signs of prolonged or excessive distress or behavioral concerns.
- Older school age children especially may benefit from discussing boundaries about disclosing information with friends, classmates and on social media outlets.



A man with short dark hair, wearing a white sweater, is shown in profile from the left, looking towards a young girl. He has his hands gently placed on her arms. The girl has long brown hair with a yellow bow, is wearing a pink and white striped shirt, and has a sad expression with her eyes downcast. They are in a brightly lit room with a white shelf in the background holding a green plant in a yellow pot.

Throughout this difficult time, reassure your child that she is safe and can come to you with concerns or questions.

Consider suggesting a special activity to keep her busy, active or involved with a familiar project. Use this time to be together, which may encourage her to share her feelings.

What to say to your child

Try to:

Start with her understanding of the situation.

Describe what has happened based upon her awareness and understanding of the situation, using age-appropriate language.

Inform your child about emotional struggles.

Address guilt, blame, shame, and responsibility.

Assure her that her family member is getting treatment/care.

Let her know that her daily routine will stay the same.

Encourage her to express her feelings. Help her to know that her reactions are normal and expected. Invite her to ask questions.

Help create a connection between the child and her family member. Tell her when she can expect to see her family member again.

Allow her not to talk if she desires, and to choose who she talks to. Discuss how your child can share information with family and friends.

Let her know you are getting support too.

Let her know it is okay to get support at school.

Help your child prepare for a family member's return if they spent time in the hospital following a suicide attempt.

Examples:

"I want to talk to you about what happened with Dad. What do you remember from last night?"

"Mom's had a difficult time the past couple months, and felt badly enough last night that she hurt herself."

"Grandpa has been feeling depressed lately. That sometimes makes it hard for him to think of solutions or make healthy choices."

"Sometimes kids can feel like they did something wrong, or that they're to blame. I want you to know that what's happening isn't anyone's fault."

"The doctors at the hospital are helping your sister. They are talking with her and helping her feel better."

"Even though it is different that Mom is not here, you will still go to school tomorrow."

"What are you thinking about what's going on with your brother? It's normal to have a lot of different feelings. Do you have anything you want to ask me?"

"Would you like to write a letter or e-mail Dad while he's in the hospital for a few days? He might like to see the picture you took yesterday too."

"I understand you don't feel like talking right now, but maybe you'll feel ready to talk in a few days. You could talk to Grandma too when you go to her house after school tomorrow."

"It helps me to talk to your Aunt Maria and also the people at church. After dinner I'm going to walk over to Aunt Maria's house, would you like to come?"

"You could also talk about this with your guidance counselor or teacher, Ms. Davis, at school. Would you like to talk to one of them?"

"Your sister is coming home tomorrow. Would you like to help me get the house ready? Do you have any questions before we pick her up from the hospital?"

Teenagers



How to Talk to a Teenager about a Suicide Attempt in Your Family

This information is intended to help inform and guide adults when talking with a teenager about a suicide attempt in the family. It is not intended to replace the advice of a mental health professional. In fact, it may be best to use this along with professional support if you or your teenager is struggling with how to talk about this difficult topic. It is important to consider your teenager's level of development and ability to understand events when deciding how to talk with him about this issue. Discuss the details of the event as appropriate and help the teenager make sense of the situation while not volunteering unnecessary information.

Talking to your teenager about a suicide attempt in your family

It is important to talk to your teenager about the suicide attempt to help him understand what has happened. Without support of family/friends, he may try to make sense of this confusing situation himself. Sometimes teenagers blame themselves for something they may or may not have done. Teenagers may not want to talk directly about their worries or feelings. Instead, they may show them in other ways. They may isolate, or not talk to their friends out of shame, uneasiness or fear of being misunderstood or rejected. It's helpful to share a hopeful outlook, and when appropriate involve your teen in activities that may help make a positive difference.

When should you talk to your teenager?

- If your teenager was exposed to the crisis and traumatized, he will need some basic understanding of what happened.
- Even if he was not exposed to the suicide attempt, you should share the basics of the attempt with him, including any obvious injuries, and let his questions guide you from there. Help him make sense of what happened in the context of mental illness (and/or substance abuse), and include the support of a mental health professional in this conversation if you are not familiar with mental illness.
- If marriage or family problems contributed to a suicide attempt, avoid details that would put the teenager in the middle, between the parents or other family members.
- The goal is to answer his questions in a calm, non-judgmental way, so he won't be afraid to ask more questions.

If you notice that your child is unusually withdrawn, tearful, or depressed, seek professional help or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For additional resources and information for families about suicide, visit: www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/education/ or www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/.

How should you talk to your teenager?

- Pick a place that is private, where your teenager will feel free to express himself. Try to provide multiple opportunities to talk, even when a teen seems unresponsive or reluctant.
- Provide a safe space for your teen to express even uncomfortable feelings, including anger. Ask him questions that will help him open up to you.
- Be aware of your own feelings and how you are coming across. Your teenager may be more likely to listen if you appear calm and approachable.
- If your family member is in the hospital, talk to your teenager as soon as possible. Keep checking in with your teenager. This will send the message that you are open to answering questions over time. Be honest.
- Offer extra support, affection and attention during this time (family meals, time together).
- Be prepared to discuss concerns about whether your teenager is at risk for similar behaviors.

Other ways to support your teenager:

- For the younger teens, help them keep healthy structure in their daily routines, such as homework time, dinnertime, and bedtime routines.
- For older teenagers, who are more independent and more likely to structure the majority of their own time, you can talk to and encourage them in practicing self-care. “Dad is in the hospital now, but we both would like to see you keep on doing such a good job with your school work. You said it helps you to sleep if you work out after school. Would you like to invite Paul to go with you to the gym this week?”
- While providing stability, also remain flexible to a teenager’s needs during a disruptive time.
- Get other support people involved (family, friends or clergy). This will benefit you and in turn benefit your teen.
- Although it’s normal for many teenagers to avoid parent’s affection, don’t be surprised if he needs more physical comfort during a stressful time.
- Teenagers can regress when stressed, and may act like they did during younger stages of development.
- As the parent/relative who has been hospitalized becomes more stable, visiting them in the hospital and attending a family therapy session with a mental health professional could be quite helpful and reassuring.
- Show appreciation for your teenager taking on additional tasks while you attend to the relative’s needs.
- Teenagers may benefit from discussing boundaries about disclosing information with friends, classmates and on social media outlets.





Throughout this difficult time, reassure your teenager you are available to talk with her about her concerns and questions, and let her know that you value her thoughts and opinions.

What do I say to my teenager?

Try to:

Start with her level of awareness and understanding of the situation.

Use her level of understanding and questions about the event as a guide when describing what happened.

Inform your teenager about emotional struggles and healthy problem-solving and coping strategies.

Address guilt, blame, shame and responsibility.

Assure your teenager that her family member is getting treatment/care.

Let her know that her daily routine will stay the same.

Encourage her to express her feelings, and her to know that her reactions are expected and normal. Invite her to ask any questions, and share her thoughts about the situation.

Help create a connection between the teenager and her family member. Tell her when she can expect to see her family member again.

Allow her not to talk if she desires, and to choose who she talks to. Discuss how your teenager can share this information with family and friends.

Let her know you are getting support, and encourage her to find ways to rely on and build her own support system.

Help your teen prepare for a family member's return, if they have spent time in the hospital following a suicide attempt.

Examples:

“Last night your brother was having a difficult time. What do you remember?”

“As you’ve noticed, Mom has been feeling depressed lately and drinking alcohol to cope. She felt so down last night that she had some suicidal thoughts and feelings.”

“Grandpa has been very depressed. Sometimes when people feel that way, they can also feel hopeless about the future and they are not able to think of healthy ways to deal with problems. Have you experienced these feelings? How do you cope?”

“I want you to know that this is not your fault, or anyone’s fault.”

“Dad is getting treatment at the hospital to help him deal with depression, and to connect him with other people who understand his situation and support him as he gets well.”

“Even though it is different that Mom is not here, you will still go to school tomorrow.”

“How are you feeling about everything that’s going on? Sometimes it can feel like there was something we could or should have done when something like that happens. Have you felt this way? What do you do when that happens?”

“Would you like to go with me to visit your sister? She is going to stay in the hospital for a few days. Would you like to email her or send her a card?”

“If you don’t want to talk about it now, I understand. Maybe you’ll be ready to talk about things in a few days. Your friend Jane has supported you before; do you think it might help to talk with her?”

“I’ve been talking with Grandma about this, and have also decided to talk to a Psychologist. You can come with me if you like. There are also support groups in town you can join. You could also talk about this with your guidance counselor or your teacher, Ms. Davis.”

“Your sister will be ready to leave the hospital on Thursday. Is there anything you’d like to talk about or ask me before she comes home?”

Additional Resources

Parents and families may find extra support and/or access to professional guidance from the following:

Mental Health America:

www.mentalhealthamerica.net/ (Click on “Finding Help”)

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):

www.nami.org/ (Click on “Support and Programs”)

SAMSHA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator:

www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov/

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Facts for Families:

www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Home.aspx

National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

www.nctsnet.org/

PBS This Emotional Life:

www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/

The following resources are geared specifically for Veterans and their families:

War Within:

www.warwithin.org/

Give an Hour:

www.giveanhour.org/

Soldier’s Project:

www.thesoldiersproject.org/

NAMI Veterans & Military Resource Center:

www.nami.org/

(Click on “Support and Programs,” then “Veterans & Military Resource Center”)

Vet Center Program:

www.vetcenter.va.gov/

Veterans Crisis Line:

www.veteranscrisisline.net/

Support

Use the space below to record names, numbers and other contact information for resources that may offer support. This may include friends, family members, and community organizations or programs.

Name

Phone Number

Email

Web Address

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