

Tackling the topic of suicide with your child

A guide to having the conversation

Talking to your children about their mental health when you suspect there is an issue can be a challenging task for any parent.

You may have noticed your child's behaviour change and they've become more withdrawn. Preparation is key before asking them how they are feeling.

Parents should not be afraid to use the word 'suicide' or use terms like 'thoughts of death' or "being better off dead' when talking to their child who they suspect is struggling with their mental health.

There is no evidence to suggest that they will put the idea in their heads which is often a concern for parents. Research has shown that acknowledging and talking about suicide may in fact reduce, rather than increase, suicide risk.

Asking is much safer than not asking or not asking directly enough.

Preparing yourself for the responses you might get are just as important as the preparation to ensure your child opens up to you and trusts you to help. Parents should be prepared if their child does admit to having suicidal thoughts and to respond with empathy. It is not their job to try and fix the problem for their child.

Allowing the child to be heard is really important.

There are ways to prepare to ensure you get the most out of the opportunity to talk to your child.

Things to think about before approaching your child

1. Time and location

Choose a private, comfortable place, with enough time.

Don't do it during a family mealtime, or late in the day when they are tired. Instead find a time when it's just the two of you and you can talk as long as you need without having to rush off. Health anxiety is fuelled by your perceptions of your risk of harm.

2. Start the conversation

If you are stuck with how to start the conversation, mention the change in behaviour you've noticed and add something positive, for example, 'I know you're usually so cheerful and lately I've noticed that this has changed. I just want to make sure that everything is going okay with you.'

Encourage them to talk by using open-ended questions like, 'What can you tell me about it?'

If they're reluctant to talk, ask more questions or agree to speak again at another time.

3. Listen and understand

Listen actively and allow them to talk. Don't interrupt or offer advice straight away.

Avoid the temptation to fill the silences.

When appropriate, reflect on some of what you've heard to show you understand.



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4. Encourage help-seeking

Encourage your child to seek help by asking them what they feel comfortable doing.

Are they ready to talk to a GP for a referral to a clinician? Would they rather look at digital support?

Help them decide on the first step towards a solution.

Offer your practical support at this stage. Discuss what you can do to help towards a solution.

5. Finish the conversation

Tell them you will find the support they have asked for and that you will be by their side as they seek support.

Arrange a time to check-in again in the not-so-distant future. This can become a regular catch up if needed.

Make sure you follow up on the ideas you came up with together – even if things change, it's good for your child to know you are true to your word.

Helpful resources and online resources

Kids Helpline | 1800 55 1800

kidshelpline.com.au

Beyondblue | 1300 22 4636

beyondblue.org.au/get-support/national-help-lines-and-websites

eHeadspace

headspace.org.au/eheadspace

Brave online

brave-online.com



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