

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT SUICIDAL CONTENT IN NEWS, MEDIA & LITERATURE

*“With all of the recent media coverage of stories about suicide, I find that it’s becoming more common for my middle school students to talk about suicide. How can I tell who is serious about it and who isn’t?”*

For whatever the reason, there seems to be more exposure by youth to suicide and other life-threatening behavior in news, media and literature than we saw in earlier generations. On the one hand, that’s probably good. It certainly seems to be reducing the stigma, especially with youth, that had made suicide a topic that couldn’t be talked about. On the other hand, a lot of what youth see and hear about suicide isn’t safe. What we mean by that is that some of what youth are exposed to glorifies or romanticizes suicide, makes it seem like an acceptable solution to life problems, and implies that life continues, in simply a changed fashion, after death (i.e. fantasy). Sometimes the stories lack examples of how to get help or lack models of adults that are helpful when they are sought out. So what’s the strategic response to these media examples by the adults who are in the lives of these children?

### ● **WHAT TO SAY AND DO?**

Think about these suggestions:

- The smartest thing adults can do is *not ignore what’s going on*. While we may want to hope the songs, books, and television series about suicide are just a passing fad, let’s face it: they are here to stay and the youth often know about them already so when you ignoring them you miss an opportunity to talk to the youth.
- We can righteously protest that what is available in public media is dangerous, but often it is already out there and kids are watching or listening (maybe without you already knowing). The best we can hope for is that suicide prevention resources are included somewhere in the programming.

### *Communication Starts with You*

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Sometimes we forget that there seems to be a generational progression in social acceptance of difficult or controversial topics. Not too many years ago, for example, cancer was simply referred to as “C” because it felt too scary to say the word. And even though we probably discussed literature like “Romeo and Juliette” in high school, suicide wasn’t the central focus. Now it is.

One of the most important things to remember is that *asking about suicide does not plant the idea in our children’s’ heads*.

Research, as far back as the 1980’s , shows that not talking about suicide can actually be more dangerous. If you ask the question, you open up the topic for conversation.

And don’t fool yourself- kids as young as elementary school hear about suicide.

*A conversation gives you a chance to correct misinformation, address rumors, and can set the stage for future talks with youth about other difficult subject matter.*

- Once we acknowledge that this content is here to stay, we're in a better position to figure out what to do about it. And the first step involves *knowing what we're talking about*.
- *Watch the show, read the book, or listen to the music that contains content about suicide (at the minimum go on the internet and find reviews of the content from experts)*. Try to view it from the eyes of a teen. Remember, the world has changed a lot since you were growing up. Standards of communication are generally more open now - kids talk about things we didn't even think about. Ask your kids for their perspective. *Your goal is to get them talk about what they think and feel, not to listen to a lecture from you. Remember chances are they already have heard about it or seen it on the internet or at a friend's house so use the media to have an open conversation about what they think and feel.*
- **Stuck for what to say?** Use the three magic words- **Tell Me More**. *.Repeat what you hear- "what I think I hear you saying is..."* to make sure you get it right. Clarify things that confuse you, don't assume you know or understand – ask them.
- Take time to think about the conversation and revisit the topic again, especially when it comes up in media.

## HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT SOMETHING

### THAT WORRIES YOU IN THE MEDIA

Most parents develop a sixth sense that helps them communicate with their children. They understand, for example, that the answer "FINE" to the question "How was your day?" can have different meanings based on the way it's said. And they know that a car trip is often the best place to initiate hard conversations- there's little opportunity for eye contact or intense scrutiny. It seems safe for everyone involved.

That observation gives us a clue about approaching conversations with kids about media that disturbs us... make the discussion safe. How do you do that? Here's some tips:

- Begin by explaining that you heard about xxx and you wonder if they've heard about it or have been talking about the topic with their friends. Asking about friends first doesn't put your children on the spot; they can tell you about friends or peers without revealing their own thoughts. This makes the conversation safe for them.
- After they've had a chance to talk about their friends, ask them for their observations.
- Talk about their reactions to the media first, then ask them if they've personally experienced anything similar in their lives.
- If the media topic is suicide, it's helpful to recognize that sometimes the death of someone with whom we identify can make us think about our own death. It may be hard, but ask your children if this has happened for themselves or their friends. Most likely the answer will be no, If the answer is yes, ask more questions, and if you're worried, consult a mental health professional, your pediatrician or a hotline for advice.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Number- 1-800-273-8255