

What Should I Do When My Child Speaks of Suicide?

Every parent becomes frightened when they think their child might kill themselves. And, being fearful that a wrong word could precipitate what is apparently a possibility, they say nothing. Or pretend he/she was joking. And, usually, suicide does not occur although their child's pain continues unassuaged.

Suicide rarely follows only a poor school grade or a child's failure to gain admission to their desired college, or a break-up with their boy/girl friend. What it (or the suicide gesture) reflects is long term unhappiness, the depth of our horror at a child's potentially premature death being analogous with that of their despair.

When a child considers suicide the most immediate goal is to safeguard their life. Thus a crucial decision must be made as to whether risk exists or that the words reflected the temporary frustration and occasional silly statement which everyone makes. This conclusion, deriving from knowledge of child development and psychopathology and supported by clinical experience and intuition, must be made by a mental health professional. It, unlike other parenting matters, cannot be a parental decision.

Most children who make a suicidal statement or gesture do not intend to harm themselves or require hospitalization. But they would benefit from counseling (for maybe just several sessions) to enable them to clarify their goals and how they might be more likely to achieve them.

Often a suicidal gesture is designed to force that counseling which the child long feared, but sensed they needed. Even when a child's act was potentially lethal, hospitalization is often not necessary--so long as they have a continuous relationship with a psychotherapist who is certain the child has control over their behavior and that he/she will not again attempt harm; and that the clinician will be telephoned immediately if suicidal thoughts re-occur, and their parents will reliably monitor their behavior.

Though horrifying in its potential, a suicidal gesture contains an element of hope for it indicates that the child, though despairing, still believes help is available and, through this aid, their life can improve.

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