How to Talk to a 9-13 Year-Old Child about a Suicide Attempt in Your Family

This information sheet is intended to serve as a guide for adults to use when talking with a 9-13 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 them about this issue.

Why should I talk to my child about a suicide attempt in the family?

It is important to talk to your child about the suicide attempt to help them understand what has happened. Without support of friends/family, they may try to make sense of this confusing situation themselves. Sometimes children blame themselves for something they may or may not have done. Children ages 9-13 may not want to talk directly about their worries or feelings. Instead, they may express fears, have trouble sleeping, or become anxious when separated from certain adults.

How should I talk to my child?

- Keep your child's daily routine as consistent and predictable as possible, but be flexible.
- Pick a place that is private where your child will feel free to talk. Be aware of what they may overhear from other conversations.
- Keep it simple. Use words your child will understand and avoid too many details. Ask them 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 them or with the family member who attempted suicide.
- If your family member is in the hospital, talk to your child as soon as possible. Keep checking in with your child. This will help to send the message that you are open to answering questions over time. Be honest.
- Get other support people involved (friends, clergy). This will benefit you and your child.
- Offer extra support, affection, and attention during this time (hugs, time together).

What do I say to my child?

- Start with their understanding of the situation. *"I want to talk to you about what happened to dad. What do you remember from last night?"*
- Describe what has happened using understandable language. *"Mom was feeling very sad and hurt herself."*
- Inform children about emotional struggles. *"Grandpa has been feeling very sad lately."*
- Address guilt, blame, shame, and responsibility. *"I want you to know that this is not your fault."*
- Assure children that their family member is getting treatment/care. *"Dad is in the hospital getting help."*
- Let them know that their daily routine will stay the same. *"Even though it is different that mom is not here, you will still go to school tomorrow."*
- Encourage them to express their feelings. Help them to know that their reactions are normal and expected. Ask if they have questions. *"I wonder what you are thinking about the things I've told you. Sometimes kids feel like it is their fault, or they did something wrong or that it will happen to them or other adults in their life. Do you feel any of these? Sometimes it is easier to draw or write about feelings than say them. Would you like to draw a picture of your feelings? Do you have any questions about grandpa and what happened?"*
- Help create a connection between the child and their family member. Tell them when they can expect to see their family member again. *"Would you like to draw a picture for or write a letter to dad while he's in the hospital? He will be there for a few days."*
- Allow them not to talk if they desire, and to choose who they talk to. Discuss how your child can share this information with family and friends. *"If you don't want to talk about it now, that's ok. We can talk about it later or you can talk to grandma, too. Would you like to talk about this with your friend Jane? What would you like her to know?"*
- Let them know you are getting support, too. *"This is something that makes me sad and I need to get some help, too (from clergy, friends, and/or my doctor)."*
- Reassure them that you are in charge and in control, and that they can come to you with concerns and questions.
- Consider suggesting a special activity to keep them busy, active, or involved with a familiar project; however, it is important not to encourage ongoing distraction or avoidance of feelings.

If you notice that your teenager is unusually withdrawn, tearful, or depressed, seek professional help or call 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For additional resources and information on how to talk with 4-8 year-olds and 14-18 year-olds about suicide visit: http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn19/VISN_19_Education.asp or http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/Veterans/.