

PARENT / FAMILY CONVERSATION GUIDELINES

When discussing a student death with **their student**



The Jed Foundation

JED HIGH
SCHOOL

Supporting a young person after the death of a classmate by suicide can be incredibly challenging, and knowing what to say—or how to help—may feel overwhelming. This guide, created by The JED Foundation and Dr. Ellen Utley, is designed to support parents, families, and caregivers in having compassionate, open, and informed conversations with their student during this difficult time. It offers guidance on how to approach the conversation with care, recognize signs of distress, and provide the emotional support young people need to navigate their grief. By fostering honest dialogue and creating a safe space for feelings, you can help your student process their emotions, find healthy ways to cope, and access additional support when needed.

The best way to support your child is to talk openly with them about the death (suicide) of their classmate. This is never easy, but it is valuable and important to address loss, grief, and suicide and to foster healing.



General Communication Guidelines

Create a space to talk about suicide and loss with your teen

- Choose a time when your student can be alone or in a setting where they are able to talk openly without worrying about what others might think about what they want to share or talk about.
 - If you do not already have a regular cadence or time that you check in with your child, set up check-ins that work for both of you and that you can stick with for a few weeks.
 - Encourage other family members to reach out - this would be a check-in to let your child know that they are not alone and that if they need to, they can turn to anyone in your family if needed.
 - Be honest about the manner of death - it's good to use the word "suicide" in your conversations because it destigmatizes how their peer died and gives the message that you (and they) do not need to be vague or secretive about this topic.
 - Try to avoid all speculation and any discussion about the details around the suicide. This shows respect for the family, avoids re-traumatizing those most impacted by the loss and minimizes risk to a teen who may be struggling with mental health concerns.
 - Emphasize a message of hope - and if it comes up, assure your child that unmanageable and overwhelming feelings can get better with help.
 - Remember that talking about suicide will not cause a person to act on suicidal thoughts.
 - If needed, remind your child that there is never just one single reason or cause for someone to attempt to die or to die by suicide.
 - Be prepared for, and try a non-judgmental approach to the range of emotions your teen might express. This might include sadness, anger, confusion, numbness, nonchalance, irritability or feeling detached. This is all normal - try statements such as, "I hear you saying that you're feeling - I am here for you and will support you through this. Is there anything more you can tell me?"
 - Expect and validate frustration, impatience or misunderstanding about how other kids at school are coping and reacting to the death on campus.
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When in doubt, just listen - it is a powerful way to support your child.

- If possible, it is good for your child to stay at school - school professionals know your child well at this point and are doing everything they can to help students balance grieving (personal and community-wide) with getting back to a routine. The school is keeping an eye out for students who may need extra time or support to process this experience and will ensure they get the care and access to resources they need.
- Stay in touch with your student's dorm counselor or advisor if you are concerned - don't worry about second guessing your intuition or gut - you may be seeing or sensing something that the school is not. Your intuition is invaluable.
- Share your observations - "I notice that you are quieter than usual, would it help to talk?"
- Validate emotions - "It's understandable [it makes sense] that you can't concentrate or get motivated, I wonder if you feel like talking about it?"
- Self disclosure is helpful, but keep it focused on the immediate situation "I recall a time in school when we faced a similar situation. Sometimes I felt [] and other times I felt nothing at all. Is this something you're feeling?"
- Try to avoid problem solving - if you want to help, you might ask if suggestions would be welcome or helpful.

If your child is struggling but not ready or willing to talk:

- Don't give up, make a plan to connect again
- Keep the lines of communication open - be available, make sure to answer texts and calls promptly.
- Check in with an adult on campus who knows your child - let them know what you are observing if you are concerned.
- Follow up in little ways - a text, a card, ask a relative to reach out for a check-in.

If your child isn't ready to talk, you can say:

- "Is there someone else you feel comfortable talking to?"
 - "I'm here if you change your mind about chatting about any of this."
 - "Do you want my help in connecting you with someone else to talk to?"
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And last, but not least, check in with yourself.

- It may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar for you to talk about emotions and mental health issues. That's OK, but it's important to address this with your child in some way. For instance, tap into resources or turn to trusted adults (another parent or adult from home, a family member, a friend, someone at school) who can fill in where you can't.
 - This may bring up situations or memories from your own past that have been sad, traumatic or disturbing. Give yourself some space to process that and recognize how you're feeling.
 - It is OK to share your feelings with your child and if you're not sure about having a conversation about a student's death, it's good to acknowledge that you are feeling uncomfortable - your child will undoubtedly pick up on how you're coping. When you are transparent and honest about your own frame of mind, it demonstrates that there are many ways to feel and react and shows that communication is a skill for coping.
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Sample Conversation Starters

“I am so sorry that you [or your school / class / dorm] is going through such a sad and tragic experience. I am here for you always.”

“I am so glad you told me.” This is a simple, powerful way to communicate your willingness to sit with the student’s feelings/thoughts and to remain connected.

“I am hearing from other parents/families that students are talking to them about [] or saying they feel []. Sounds like kids are feeling the same as you and that you’re not alone. But how are you doing with it?”

“This must be really [sad, confusing, frightening, upsetting..]. Sadly, there are times in our lives when there’s no way to understand why something like this might happen. But there are so many reasons to have hope. Asking for help can get anyone through overwhelming or unmanageable thoughts, feelings and circumstances.”