

Hello, and welcome to the Foundflashlight Podcast, where we help parents help their teens find a way through the darkness. I'm Justine and today I want to talk about one of the common reactions to learning that your child has thought about, or maybe even attempted, suicide.

As a reminder, I am not a professional and this is not medical or psychological advice. I am just a parent on the internet who wants to share my opinions and experiences in hopes that they can help someone else.

It is terrifying if we learn that our child is thinking about ending their life. Even more terrifying, if they have taken action. I'm not a professional, so I can't tell you what type of therapy or program you need. But I am familiar with the fear and the overwhelming need to do whatever it takes to keep your child safe.

Our instinct is to remove anything dangerous. We want to hide all the knives, throw out all the medicine and take their bedroom door off the hinges

But let's talk about this a bit. The instinct is completely normal, especially because we feel helpless and we want to do something that feels like control. But is your family really going to use plastic utensils to cook and eat with? Will there be no more over-the-counter or prescription medicine in your home? Is no one going to ever shave their legs or face again?

I'll use a common instinct as an example. Because the ones I mentioned are difficult to live with, an idea people land on is taking the kids bedroom door off its hinges, so that they can't be in there "doing god knows what!" And I get it. We are feeling all kinds of things, all of them upsetting. But taking your kids' door away will not keep them safer. It will amp up the level of tension and lower their inclination to talk to you.

If your kid stays out past curfew or breaks some other household rule, you are the parent and you can lay down the line and have a consequence, a punishment. But you wouldn't punish them for getting the flu. Treating their mental health as a misbehaviour is not going to get the result you are hoping for. If your kid is having thoughts of suicide, they are not feeling understood and connected. You saying that they can't be trusted and can't have any privacy is not going to make them feel more connected, it is going to make them feel more alienated - and angry and possibly more likely to take a bigger action. We are trying to make space for our kids to feel safe, not back them into a corner.

I'm not saying that you don't have the right to do what you want. It is your home and you are the parent. I'm asking you to take a breath and play it out a little further in your mind. What is your kid going to feel like, sitting in their bed with their door off the hook? Do you think those feelings are going to lead to the type of behaviour you are hoping for? If the family sits down to dinner and there are only plastic utensils, is your kid going to feel proud or embarrassed? What will it be like when their siblings are eating with plastic forks and they have to watch? Do you think it will teach them a lesson so they won't try to kill themselves? More likely, it will reinforce

their feelings of worthlessness or being a burden as well as incentivise them to spend less time at home.

They are struggling and you have to decide if that is something for which they should be punished. Because you may think you are doing it for them, but I guarantee they will only see it as something you are doing to them and that will drive them farther away, not bring them closer.

I am not suggesting that you take a laissez faire position. If you find out your kid is thinking about suicide, this is not the time to ignore it and hope it is a phase that will pass. But in my opinion, it is also not the time to take actions that keep raising the temperature.

So what should you do?

You can start by asking them what they would find helpful. If they say they don't know, ask if they would like to come up with ideas or would it be easier if you came up with some suggestions and then you can talk about it. Ask what works for them about being in their room for long periods and what is hard. Is there something about their space that could be improved? Is there something about common spaces that could be improved? Are there things in the house that make them feel safe, are there things that make them nervous? You can talk about what concerns you about them spending too much time isolated in their room and come up with a plan together that has them in common spaces for some part of the day.

My family keeps our medicine in the kitchen so it is visible and we remember to take it. One time my kid asked if I could keep the medicine in my room for a while because they were having dark thoughts and they didn't think they would act on them but they also didn't want to see the medicine and know that it was so easily accessible. It was an easy fix and a few days later, when they were ready, we brought it back to the kitchen. But that only happened because my kid knew they could bring me something hard and that I wouldn't freak out. (I talk more about that in the last episode about talking to your kids if you want to hear more.)

I guess what I am saying about all of this is to try not to be reactionary. Your goal is to keep your kid from taking an action you don't want them to. Big actions on your part are more likely to lead to big actions on their part. Try and see the long game and play out the possible responses to your actions. Do they get you where you want to go? And, in most cases, you can leave the plastic utensils for picnics.

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