

Teen Suicide: Information for Parents



From the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide

One of the more difficult challenges of parenting is realizing that you don't always know what your children are thinking and feeling. You may be aware that suicide is the third leading cause of death in adolescence but you can't imagine your child might become one of those statistics. When do the normal ups and downs of adolescence become something to worry about? How can you know if suicide is a risk for your family? And if you are worried about it, what can you do?

If you find yourself asking some of these questions, you're not alone. Although youth suicide is a relatively rare phenomenon, thoughts of suicide are not. One national study, for example, found that almost 20% of high school students admitted to thinking about suicide. Many parents may feel at a loss. Feelings can be difficult subjects to discuss under the best of circumstances, so how in the world do you ask about feelings related to suicide?

The first step is to learn about the factors that can put a teen at risk for suicide. There are lots of sites that list risk factors; spend some time reading them--the more you know, the better you'll be prepared for understanding what can put your child at risk. Here are a few of our own tips, important things to remember.

If your parental radar is going off, there's a good chance that something IS going on with your child. What it is, however, may not be clear. The easiest way to try to get a handle on what's going on is to try the following:

- **ASK** your child about their concerns.
"You don't seem yourself lately. What's going on?"
"I'm concerned about you. How are you doing?"
- **LISTEN** to the answer. Teens always complain that adults don't listen to them, so show your child that you're different.
- **PARAPHRASE** what you hear them say back to them.
"So you're feeling pretty overwhelmed with school and your job and feel like the only way out is to quit the track team."
Remember, teens have very limited life experience, so the concerns and worries they have may seem minor to us. This isn't the time for a conversation on perspective--it's your opportunity to see the world through their eyes!

- **OFFER TO HELP** and follow through.
"Is there anything I can do to make things a little easier for you?"
 Check back at a later time to see how things are going.

- **BE SPECIFIC** with the reasons for your concerns, especially if you get an answer that seems evasive to you.
"I've noticed you aren't spending much time with your friends anymore and even though you sit at your desk for hours, your homework never seems to be done."
 Your child may minimize behavior changes (*"Everyone in the class is failing--it's not just me"*), so it's important to look for more than one change in previous functioning.

- **ASK TEACHERS AND FRIENDS** about your child. Listen to what your child's friends have to say--they are often the first to be clued in to kids who need help. Check with teachers, too. Accumulate as much data as you can from as many sources as you can. The more information you have, the better able you'll be to decide what you need to do next.

- **ASK ABOUT SUICIDE DIRECTLY** if you get an answer that suggests suicide is on your child's mind.
"Sometimes I think life isn't worth living."
"I'm tired of trying. I just want to give up."
 You cannot plant the idea in your child's mind! *"No, I hadn't thought of that, but now that you mention it..."* is not the reaction you're going to get! What you will do is open up a line of communication about thoughts or feelings that are usually uncomfortable and frightening. This is the first step in addressing the problem.

- **DON'T MINIMIZE** the answer you get or try to talk your child out of the feelings.
"I know this is a hard time for you, but everyone has hard times."
"Why don't you go for a run--exercise always makes you feel better."
 This is the time for calm reassurance.
"Those thoughts sound really upsetting--I'm going to do everything I can right now to find someone who's trained in this to help you deal with them."

- **ACT IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT SUICIDE OR YOUR CHILD TALKS ABOUT SUICIDE!** Get your child to a mental health professional for evaluation as soon as possible. There are a variety of ways to do this:
 - **Call your local hospital emergency room and ask if they provide psychiatric screening for suicide risk for youth.** MAKE SURE to use the words: "suicide risk". It's essential that they understand that you need this evaluation immediately and can't wait for a referral at a later date.

 - **If your local hospital can't help, call the National Suicide Crisis Line.** Explain your situation to the person who answers the phone and ask their

help in finding a local referral source. There may also be hotlines that are listed in your phonebook. Whomever you choose to call, however, must understand the urgency of your situation. Although an evaluation might determine that your child is not at immediate risk for suicide, this is a decision that is best left to a trained mental health professional.

- Use the time in the evaluation to **ask questions about what's going on with your child and what you can do to be helpful**. Don't worry about "confidentiality". Whenever a person is at danger to self or others, the protections of confidentiality don't apply. Here are some of the questions you might want to ask:
 - Have you determined that my child is at risk for suicide?
 - What factors did you consider in making that determination?
 - What appears to be the reason for my child's suicide risk at this point in time?
 - Based on your clinical judgment, what level of risk do you believe to be present--low, moderate, or high?
 - What are the elements of a crisis plan to contain that risk?
 - How can I, as his/her parent, assist in the provision of safety?
 - What type of follow-up are you recommending?
- **FOLLOW-UP** must include involvement with a mental health professional who has experience working with suicidal youth. Even after the thoughts of suicide have subsided, your child will need help to understand what caused those thoughts in the first place and how to come up with less destructive solutions to life problems in the future.
- **REMEMBER** that whenever someone--regardless of their age--has struggled with thoughts of suicide, one of the essential components in continuing to provide a safe environment is involving members of that person's support system. It's critical for you to stay involved and informed about what's happening with your child, even after the suicide crisis has passed.