

# **Youth Suicide: What parents need to know**

Mayo Clinic and NASP

Is your child at risk of suicide? While no child is immune, there are factors that can make some adolescents more vulnerable than others. Youth suicide is preventable. Know the risk factors, the warning signs and the steps you can take to protect your child. Understand how to tell if your child might be suicidal and where to turn for help and treatment.

## **What makes youth vulnerable to suicide?**

Many individuals who attempt or die by suicide have a mental health condition. As a result, they have trouble coping with the stress of being a teen, such as dealing with rejection, failure, breakups and family turmoil. They might also be unable to see that they can turn their lives around — and that suicide is a permanent response, not a solution, to a temporary problem.

## **What are the risk factors for youth suicide?**

- Having a psychiatric disorder, including depression
- Loss of or conflict with close friends or family members
- History of physical or sexual abuse or exposure to violence
- Problems with alcohol or drugs
- Physical or medical issues
- Being the victim of bullying
- Being uncertain of sexual orientation
- Exposure to the suicide of a family member or friend
- Family history of mood disorder or suicidal behavior

## **What are the warning signs that a youth might be suicidal?**

- Talking or writing about suicide — for example, making statements such as "I'm going to kill myself," or "I won't be a problem for you much longer"
- Withdrawing from social contact
- Having mood swings
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Feeling trapped or hopeless about a situation
- Changing normal routine, including eating or sleeping patterns
- Doing risky or self-destructive things
- Giving away belongings when there is no other logical explanation for why this is being done
- Developing personality changes or being severely anxious or agitated

## **What should I do if I suspect my child is suicidal?**

If you think your child is in immediate danger, call 911, your local emergency number or a suicide hotline number — such as 1-916-368-3111 in Sacramento, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) in English, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-888-628-9454 in Spanish. You can also text the word TALK to 741741 and someone will text back.

If you suspect that your child might be thinking about suicide, talk to him or her immediately. Don't be afraid to use the word "suicide." Talking about suicide won't plant ideas in your child's head. Ask your child to talk about his or her feelings and listen. Don't dismiss his or her problems. Instead, reassure your child of your love. Remind your child that he or she can work through whatever is going on — and that you're willing to help.

Also, seek medical help for your child. Ask your child's doctor to guide you. Youth who are feeling suicidal usually need to see a psychiatrist or psychologist experienced in diagnosing and treating children with mental

health problems. The doctor will want to get an accurate picture of what's going on from a variety of sources, such as the child, parents or guardians, other people close to the child, school reports, and previous medical or psychiatric evaluations.

If you have any concerns about suicide, please talk to the school counselor or school psychologist at the Language Academy.

## **What can I do to prevent youth suicide?**

- Address depression or anxiety. Don't wait for your child to come to you. If your child is sad, anxious or appears to be struggling — ask what's wrong and offer your help.
- Pay attention. If your child is thinking about suicide, he or she is likely displaying warning signs. Listen to what your child is saying and watch how he or she is acting. Never shrug off threats of suicide as a child just looking for attention.
- Discourage isolation. Encourage your child to spend time with supportive friends and family.
- Encourage a healthy lifestyle. Help your child eat well, exercise and get regular sleep.
- Support the treatment plan. If your child is undergoing treatment for suicidal behavior, remind him or her that it might take time to feel better. Help your child follow his or her doctor's recommendations. Encourage your child to participate in activities that will help him or her rebuild confidence.
- Safely store firearms, alcohol and medications. Access to means can play a role if a child is already suicidal.

## **Protective Factors**

The presence of resiliency factors can lessen the potential of risk factors that lead to suicidal ideation and behaviors. Once a child or adolescent is considered at risk, schools, families, and friends should work to build these factors in and around the youth. These include:

- Family support and cohesion, including good communication.
- Peer support and close social networks.
- School and community connectedness.
- Cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide and promote healthy living.
- Adaptive coping and problem-solving skills, including conflict-resolution.
- General life satisfaction, good self-esteem, sense of purpose.
- Easy access to effective medical and mental health resources.

## **Parents must:**

1. Continue to take threats seriously: Follow through is important even after the child calms down or informs the parent "they didn't mean it." Avoid assuming behavior is simply attention seeking (but at the same time avoid reinforcing suicide threats).
2. Access school supports: If parents are uncomfortable with following through on referrals, they can give the school psychologist/school counselor permission to contact the referral agency, provide referral information, and follow up on the visit.
3. Maintain communication with the school: Your communication will be crucial to ensuring that the school is a safe, comfortable place for your child.

***Remember,  
youth suicide is preventable.  
If you're worried about your child,  
talk to him or her and seek help right away.***

**Important telephone numbers:**

- **911 (if in immediate danger)**
- **Local Suicide Hotline, Sacramento: 1-916-368-3111**
- **National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-888-628-9454 (in Spanish)**
- **National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1- 800-273-8255 (in English)**
- **You can also text the word TALK to 741741 and someone will text back**