

Preventing Youth Suicide: Tips for Parents and Educators

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth between 10 and 19 years of age. However, **suicide is preventable**. Youth who are contemplating suicide frequently give warning signs of their distress. Parents, teachers, and friends are in a key position to pick up on these signs and get help. Most important is to never take these warning signs lightly or promise to keep them secret. When all adults and students in the school community are committed to making suicide prevention a priority—and are empowered to take the correct actions—we can help youth before they engage in behavior with irreversible consequences.

Suicide Risk Factors

Certain characteristics are associated with increased suicide risk. These include:

- Mental illness including depression, conduct disorders, and substance abuse.
- Family stress/dysfunction.
- Environmental risks, including presence of a firearm in the home.
- Situational crises (i.e., traumatic death of a loved one, physical or sexual abuse, family violence, etc.).

Suicide Warning Signs

Many suicidal youth demonstrate observable behaviors that signal their suicidal thinking. These include:

- Suicidal threats in the form of direct and indirect statements.
- Suicide notes and plans.
- Prior suicidal behavior.
- Making final arrangements (e.g., making funeral arrangements, writing a will, giving away prized possessions).
- Preoccupation with death.
- Changes in behavior, appearance, thoughts and/or feelings.

What to Do

Youth who feel suicidal are not likely to seek help directly; however, parents, school personnel, and peers can recognize the warning signs and take immediate action to keep the youth safe. When a youth gives signs that they may be considering suicide, the following actions should be taken:

- Remain calm.
- Ask the youth directly if he or she is thinking about suicide.
- Focus on your concern for their wellbeing and avoid being accusatory.
- Listen.
- Reassure them that there is help and they will not feel like this forever.
- Do not judge.
- Provide constant supervision. Do not leave the youth alone.
- Remove means for self-harm.
- Get help:** Peers should not agree to keep the suicidal thoughts a secret and instead should tell an adult, such as a parent, teacher, or school psychologist. Parents should seek help from school or community mental health resources as soon as possible. School staff should take the student to the designated school mental health professional or administrator.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN SUICIDE PREVENTION: Children and adolescents spend a substantial part of their day in school under the supervision of school personnel. Effective suicide and violence prevention is integrated with supportive mental health services, engages the entire school community, and is imbedded in a positive school climate through student behavioral expectations and a trustful student/adult relationship. Therefore, it is crucial for all school staff to be familiar with and watchful for risk factors and warning signs of suicidal behavior. The entire school staff should work to create an environment where students feel safe sharing such information. School psychologists and other crisis team personnel, including the school counselor and school administrator, are trained to intervene when a student is identified at risk for suicide. These individuals conduct suicide risk assessment, warn/inform parents, provide recommendations and referrals to community services, and often provide follow up counseling and support at school.

Parental Notification and Participation

Parent notification is a vital part of suicide prevention. Parents need to be informed and actively involved in decisions regarding their child's welfare. Even if a child is judged to be at low risk for suicidal behavior, schools will ask parents to sign a Notification of Emergency Conference form to indicate that relevant information has been provided. These notifications must be documented. Additionally, parents are crucial members of a suicide risk assessment as they often have information critical to making an appropriate assessment of risk, including mental health history, family dynamics, recent traumatic events, and previous suicidal behaviors.

After a school notifies a parent of their child's risk for suicide and provides referral information, the responsibility falls upon the parent to seek mental health assistance for their child. Parents must:

- 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 attention seeking.
- Access school supports: If parents are uncomfortable with following through on referrals, they can give the school psychologist permission to contact the referral agency, provide referral information, and follow up on the visit. The school can also assist in providing transportation to get the parent and child to the referral agency.
- Maintain communication with the school. After such an intervention, the school will also provide follow-up supports. Your communication will be crucial to ensuring that the school is the safest, most comfortable place for your child.

Resiliency Factors

The presence of resiliency factors can lessen the potential of risk factors to 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.