

What You Should Know

ABOUT SUICIDE



There is no need to be embarrassed about asking questions or reaching out for help. It is okay to be concerned about your child and it is your job as a parent to make sure that you are doing everything you can to get them the support they need. As a parent, you have instincts about your child, and if your instinct tells you that something is wrong and this is not “just a phase” then you should listen to yourself. Sometimes our embarrassment comes from not knowing where to turn.

The first thing you need to do is get some clarity about what is worrying you. One of the best ways to try to pinpoint the specific behaviors or feelings that have you concerned is to think about the ways in which these behaviors are ‘changes’ from the way your child normally acts. Are things different just at home or also at school? How about with friends? Siblings? Listing examples of the behaviors that fuel your concerns is a concrete and objective place to start. Seek help from one of the following individuals or groups who understand and can assist in processing you and your child's next steps.

- **Your Pediatrician or Family Doctor**
- **Outpatient Therapists**
- **Psychologists**
- **Group Therapy**
- **Psychiatrists**
- **Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP)**
- **Inpatient Hospitalization**

SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS



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?

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. Are you concerned that someone you know may be at risk for suicide? Your first step in helping may be as simple as learning the FACTS or warning signs. The following signs may mean that a youth is at risk for suicide, particularly if that person attempted suicide in the past.

- **FEELINGS** - Expressing hopelessness about the future.
- **ACTIONS** - Displaying severe/overwhelming pain or distress.
- **CHANGES** - Showing worrisome behavioral cues or marked changes in behavior, including: withdrawal from friends or changes in social activities; anger or hostility; or changes in sleep.
- **THREATS** - Talking about, writing about, or making plans for suicide.
- **SITUATIONS** - Experiencing stressful situations including those that involve loss, change, create personal humiliation, or involve getting into trouble at home, in school or with the law. These kinds of situations can serve as triggers for suicide.

SHOULD I TALK TO MY CHILD ABOUT SUICIDE?

I'm afraid if I bring up suicide that it's going to plant the idea in his head! Isn't it better if I don't say anything at all?

A lot of people get confused by this. Just like you would want to talk about drug or alcohol use with your child, it's really important to address the issues of suicide. It's a myth that talking about suicide can plant the idea in someone's mind. Kids hear about suicide from a variety of sources and this is nothing new to them. In fact, talking about it can be a real relief. It's like having a secret you feel no one will want to hear; once you can talk about and expose it to reality, you have a much better chance of figuring out what to do about it.



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662-349-1555 • www.healingheartscac.org

ARE SUICIDAL THOUGHTS A NORMAL FOR TEENS?



Many teens will acknowledge that they've had a suicidal thought at one time or another. For example, in a national study conducted every year by the Centers for Disease Control almost 18% of high school students admit to having had thoughts of suicide in the last 12 months. Almost 8% admit to making an attempt. That's why having that conversation about suicide is so important. If you get any hint that your child may be having these thoughts, it's essential that you ask them.

For many kids, thoughts about dying remain just that, simply thoughts. In a small percentage of kids, however these thoughts may be accompanied by a plan. That's an extremely dangerous sign that requires immediate intervention. And again, that's why it's so important to ask your child about suicide if you have even the slightest reason for concern.

HOW DO I TALK TO MY CHILD ABOUT SUICIDE?



Contrary to myth, talking about suicide CANNOT plant the idea in someone's head! It actually can open up communication about a topic that is often kept a secret, and secrets that are exposed to the rational light of day often become less powerful and scary. You also give your child permission to bring up the subject again in the future.

If it isn't prompted by something your kid is saying or doing that worries you, approach this topic in the same way as other subjects that are important to you, but may or may not be important to your child:

- **Timing is everything!** Pick a time when you have the best chance of getting your child's attention. Sometimes a car ride, for example, assures you of a captive, attentive audience. Or a suicide that has received media attention can provide the perfect opportunity to bring up the topic.
- **Think about what you want to say ahead of time and rehearse a script if necessary.** It always helps to have a reference point: ("I was reading in the paper that youth suicide has been increasing..." or "I saw that your school is having a program for teachers on suicide prevention.")
- **If this is a hard subject for you to talk about, admit it!** ("You know, I never thought this was something I'd be talking with you about, but I think it's really important"). By acknowledging your discomfort, you give your child permission to acknowledge his/her discomfort too.
- **Ask for your child's response. Be direct!** ("What do you think about suicide?", "Is it something that any of your friends talk about?", "Have you ever thought about it? What about your friends?")
- **Listen to what your child has to say. You've asked the questions, so simply consider your child's answers.** If you hear something that worries you, be honest about that too. "What you're telling me has really gotten my attention and I need to think about it some more. Let's talk about this again, okay?"
- **Don't overreact or under-react.** Overreaction will close off any future communication on the subject. Under-reacting, especially in relation to suicide, is often just a way to make ourselves feel better. ANY thoughts or talk of suicide ("I felt that way a while ago but don't any more") should ALWAYS be revisited. Remember that suicide is an attempt to solve a problem that seems impossible to solve in any other way. Ask about the problem that created the suicidal thoughts. This can make it easier to bring up again in the future ("I wanted to ask you again about the situation you were telling me about...")

REMEMBER...



Once you acknowledge that suicide is as much of a risk for your child as not wearing a seat belt while driving, or using alcohol or drugs, or engaging in risky sexual behavior, you've taken the first step in prevention. You talk to your children about these other behaviors which can put them at personal risk, and suicide is no different. It's something you CAN and SHOULD talk about with your children!

If you notice anything that makes you concerned... ask your child specifically and directly, especially if you see more than one of these signs. If you hear anything that makes you uneasy, get a consultation from a mental health professional. It's the same thing you would do if you were worried that your child had a physical problem, this is really no different.