



Suicide Prevention: A Resource for Parents and Caregivers

American Academy
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention



Mental health struggles and suicidal thoughts are common for many young people.

Suicide can be prevented. There are things that you can do to reduce risk.

As children grow into teenagers, they go through many physical, social, and emotional changes. Parents have the ability to support their child's mental and emotional development through these changes. Just as parents learn to keep young children safe from harm, they can learn strategies to support mental health and promote resilience as their children grow. This quick guide is meant to help parents recognize warning signs, learn strategies to support their children, and seek clinical help for mental health concerns.

Know the Risks and Provide Support

There is no single cause that leads to suicide or suicidal thoughts. Research shows that people who die by suicide often have a mix of risk and protective factors in their life. Support from family members can also make a big difference by helping youth and young adults cope when life feels overwhelming.



Be Aware of Common Risk Factors

- Mental health conditions, such as depression
- Social isolation
- Alcohol or other substance use
- Family or peer conflicts
- Bullying
- Experience with a suicide death in their family or peer group
- Experience with racism or discrimination
- Access to dangerous weapons, toxic substances, or medications
- Stigma associated with mental health or help-seeking
- Previous struggles with suicidal thoughts or attempts

Ways You Can Help

- Develop coping and problem-solving skills
- Encourage connections to family, friends, and community
- Support access to healthcare
- Nurture supportive relationships with family members and other trusted adults
- Restrict access to weapons, toxic substances, or medications

Support from family members can make a big difference by helping youth and young adults cope.



Important Warning Signs for Parents

You may notice some behavior changes in your child that are worrying. It is very important to be aware that not all youth and young adults at risk of suicide will show these signs, and conversely, that not all youth who show these signs are at risk. However, the behaviors listed below may be signs that your child is in emotional distress.



Sudden increase in reckless behaviors



Significant changes in eating or sleeping habits



Isolating from family and friends



Extreme mood swings or irritability



Withdrawing from activities they used to enjoy



Increased alcohol and other substance use



Neglect of self-care or personal hygiene



Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself



Talking about being a burden to others, feeling trapped, or having no reason to live

The Power of Talking it Out

As your child moves through adolescence and young adulthood, there are many things you can do to stay connected with them. Work to establish a supportive home environment where open discussion is encouraged. Try to talk openly and assure your child that asking for help or seeking therapy is a sign of strength—not weakness.

It may feel scary to start a conversation with your child, especially if you have specific concerns. Don't worry about getting your words exactly right, but rather be calm and remind them there is no challenge that is too big for a family to get through together. Sometimes it can be hard to tell whether day-to-day stress is getting the best of them, or when something more serious may be going on. It is best to ask directly if you notice concerning signs.



01

Create a safe and open space with conversation starters

Ask about their day

"How was school? What's new?"

Start with one observation rather than unloading everything that concerns you

"It seems like you've been spending more time in your room. How are things going with your friends lately?"

Ask open-ended questions

"You seem stressed out lately. How has volleyball practice been for you?"

Reassure them they can trust you with anything shared

"I'm always here for you. What's on your mind?"

02

Find the right moment

Start a conversation during a time when you are already in dialogue or spending time together

(For example, in the car, or watching a TV show)

Find a moment when your child seems more open to having a discussion

Describe what you've noticed in a non-judgmental way

(Avoid judgmental phrases like, "You're too angry")

Engage a Medical Professional

Talk with your child's pediatrician or primary care provider if you notice concerning signs or symptoms. As skilled practitioners, they have a range of tools to identify suicide risk and help support you and your family. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that pediatricians begin screening all youth for suicide risk at age 12 years. Remember that asking questions about suicide does not cause harm. When your child's pediatrician asks about thoughts of suicide, it is to keep them safe.

The care you may receive from your child's pediatrician or primary care provider includes:

- Asking your child screening questions that have been tested through research. These questions will help identify suicide risk or thoughts
- Having a private conversation with your child to learn more about how they are feeling
- Talking with you about safety concerns
- Linking your family to mental health resources based on level of need



Resources for Suicide Prevention

988 Suicide & Crisis Hotline 24/7

Call or text 988 in a mental health crisis or visit 988lifeline.org

Crisis Text Line

Text TALK to 741741 for free, 24/7 support via text

Trevor Project

Chat/call/text line for LGBTQ+ youth at thetrevorproject.org

Trans Lifeline

Peer support for individuals who are transgender. Call 877-565-8860 or visit translifeline.org

HealthyChildren.org by American Academy of Pediatrics

Information on supporting resilience and mental health in families

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

afsp.org/what-to-do-when-someone-is-at-risk