



Tips for talking about suicide prevention

- 1. Don't be afraid to ask:** It is a common misconception that asking about suicidal feelings will in some way “plant the idea” in a child’s mind and cause them to attempt suicide. In fact, the opposite is true. Addressing the topic of suicide in a non-judgmental way lets them know that you care and that you take your child’s emotions seriously. It opens the door of communication, giving them the opportunity to share what they are feeling.
- 2. When talking to your child about suicide, we want to use clear and direct language.** We may be tempted to ‘sugar coat’ terms, but its far more effective to be direct rather than vague. Asking open ended questions will help you better understand, as they glean more than just a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response. We want to avoid asking leading questions: never use leading questions that imply you have a desired answer in mind, such as “you aren’t thinking about suicide, are you?” this shuts down communication and can be counterproductive.
- 3. Connection is incredibly important for kids’ health and well-being.** Help your child identify people in their lives they can look to for help. Let them know that you are always there to talk, even about the hard stuff, but if that’s too uncomfortable for them, that they can talk to other trusted adults if they need support. These may be other family members, parents of a close friend, a neighbor, a teacher or school counselor.
- 4. Bullying, perfectionism, or poor academic performance may be precipitating behaviors to a risk of suicide.** Other precipitating behaviors include past delinquent activity, barriers to mental health treatment, a history of or presence of depression or mental illness, or drug or alcohol use.

While bullying or cyberbullying alone does not directly cause increased suicides, youth that are victimized are at increased risk for low self-esteem, depression, suicidal ideation, and a range of other emotional problems. Interestingly, it is not only the victims of bullies who are at increased risk, the perpetrators also show increased risk. We need to remember that even if one or more of these things apply to your child, that doesn’t automatically mean they are thinking about suicide.
- 5. There are direct and indirect warning signs when it comes to suicide.** Someone may be direct, stating things like “I am going to kill myself” or they may be more indirect, such as “you guys will be better off without me when I’m gone.” Other warning signs may be suicidal ideation, a plan or intent to die by suicide, searching for methods to end one’s life, focusing on death, dramatic changes in personality or appearance, or dealing with a stressful life event or loss.

You may see bizarre behavior, agitation, overwhelming sense of guilt, shame, or rejection, feelings of purposelessness or sense of being trapped, significant change in eating or sleeping

patterns, severe decline in school performance, or giving away belongings. If child has had adverse experiences in childhood, like abuse, neglect, presence of family violence, parental substance use, poverty, multiple moves, a parent with mental health disorder or criminal behavior, they are also at risk. Being familiar with warning signs can help you as a caregiver to know when to step in and help.

6. **When individuals injure themselves, it is not always a suicide attempt.** Non-suicidal self-injury refers to the intentional damaging of one's skin or body without the intent to die. They may do this in an attempt to cope with uncomfortable feelings or distract from them, to relieve stress or pressure, to shift attention from emotional pain by provoking physical pain, or to relieve a sense of emptiness by feeling physical pain. While people report that they do not intend to die when engaging in non-suicidal self-injury, research finds that this may predict later suicidal behavior.
7. **What are some ways to help children and teens who may be suicidal?** Encourage them to talk about what they are feeling/why they are feeling depressed or distressed. Be sure to Listen—don't lecture—and validate their feelings. Don't try to convince them they should not feel the way they do. Validating doesn't mean you are condoning high risk behaviors, rather you are fostering a meaningful connection with them.

Do not underestimate the positive impact that your relationship with a teen may have. By establishing a supportive, trusting relationship, you may mitigate their sense of not belonging, with potentially life-saving outcomes. At the same time, never use your relationship with a teen as leverage against them. For example, suggesting to a suicidal teen,

"You wouldn't do that to me, would you?" or "I know you are not going to hurt yourself because I know you realize how much that would hurt me" is not appropriate. Trust your instincts—if it may be serious, seek help.

8. **Create a proactive safety plan.** This may be something you do with your child at home or with their therapist, physician, school, or other support.
- First, identify your child's unique warning signs that they may be needing help—do they draw inward? Maybe there is a significant change to their sleep or eating patterns? Or maybe they are being bullied?
 - Ensure the child's overall environment is safe. This may mean removing sharp objects, requesting bedroom doors be left open,
 - Help your child identify coping strategies. These are things they can do to help them get their mind off troubled thoughts, such as asking a parent to go for a walk, journaling, shooting hoops, or talking about it with a trusted adult.
 - This is where a list of safe people and places may also be helpful. Have contact information accessible to your child for other trusted adults if they are uncomfortable talking to you.
 - Reach out to professionals for help.
9. **Help kids identify ways to cope with stress, self soothe, and practice resilience in the face of difficult events.**

If you or a loved one are struggling,
free, 24/7, confidential help is available:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-8255

Text **HOME** to **741741** to text with a crisis counselor