

Teens and suicide: What parents should know

As a parent, you can approach suicide prevention in the same way you do other safety or health issues for your children. By educating yourself, you can learn what puts kids at greatest risk of suicide – and what protects them most strongly.

Should parents be concerned about teen suicide?

Suicide is in the news and in popular entertainment now more than ever, especially in regard to teens. You can play a role in building up your child's mental health simply by becoming aware of the risk factors and warning signs that can lead to suicide, making yourself available to your child, knowing how to practice having a caring conversation, and being aware that help is always available.

What can I do to protect my teen or tween from suicide risk?

As a parent, you can teach and model healthy habits for mental health just as you would with physical health. Taking care of your own mental health, talking about it openly, and seeking therapy when warranted is one way to model healthy practices.

If your child sees you approaching your own challenges and learning for your own mistakes in an open way, they will understand that it's okay to struggle and to learn from mistakes. They may develop flexibility and compassion for their own mis-steps — possibly even empathy for others, seeing how you navigate challenging times. They will also understand that life is messy and challenging for everyone at different times.

Check in with your child regularly, beyond just day-to-day tasks such as homework. You can learn how to invite deeper conversations through further guidance listed on this page.

If your child has a history of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, self-harm or substance use, you should monitor them more closely, and consider involving a professional, either at key times, or for the longer term for more chronic conditions.

How can I tell if my child is behaving like a normal teenager – e.g. being moody – or if there might be something wrong?

When children start puberty, there are changes in their body and brain that can and do lead to behavioural changes. But there is a normal range which can manifest as moodiness, irritability and pushing you away. This is a natural part of adolescent development. What should be concerning is if you notice indications of hopelessness or worthlessness, a withdrawal from friends and activities, or suicidal thinking or behaviour. These are not typical manifestations of teenage angst.

You know your child. You know their usual patterns, their common reactions to frustration and challenges, and what their good days and bad days look like. Trust your instincts if their behaviour goes beyond these usual patterns of behaviour. It could be just the tip of the iceberg of possible changes in their physical or mental health. It's worth engaging them in conversation to get a fuller understanding of what they are experiencing so you can provide support, and get a better sense of how severe it is.

If your teen or tween's sleep, energy, appetite, motivation and frustration aren't bouncing back to normal after a few days, get them to see their GP or a mental health practitioner.

How can I talk to my teen about mental health and suicide?

Don't be afraid to have a conversation with your child about mental health and suicide. Ask your child how they're doing, what's happening in their world these days, and what their concerns are. It can start simply by asking, "Are you okay?"

Listen intently and without judgement. Ask open-ended questions, i.e. those that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Resist the urge to offer quick fixes or solutions to their challenges, which tends to shut down further conversation. Validate and support their feelings.

Follow their cues, and say things like, "Tell me more about it. I'd love to understand more about how that affects you. When he said that/did that to you, how did that make you feel?"

Should I use the same approach for different age groups, i.e. tweens (ages 8 to 12) or teens (13 to 17)?

The approach is very similar for tweens and teens, but with changes in language based on their level of sophistication and self-awareness. Use language that makes sense to your child, given their age, development, and what you know of how they think about things.

For a young child, you can ask about physical symptoms like stomach aches, and changes in feelings like getting upset or angry more often. If it seems to you that they feel hopeless, trapped or overwhelmed – then ask if they ever think about hurting themselves or ending their life.

For older children, or kids who have demonstrated they are aware of their own thoughts and feelings, ask about their perceptions, as well as other symptoms like sleep problems, mood changes and feelings of hopelessness, or of feeling trapped or overwhelmed.

What if they don't want to talk?

If your child isn't ready to talk, leave the invitation open for later by saying, "Whenever you want to talk, I'm here to listen and support you." You could add "I won't judge, and I'll never stop supporting you, no matter what challenges you face."

The likelihood is that your child will open up when you least expect it, sitting side-by-side rather than face-to-face, in the car or engaged in some other activity together.

When your teen starts to open up, be careful not to fall into the trap of jumping in with a solution or by saying, "You should..." or "Why didn't you..."

What if I'm concerned my child is thinking about suicide?

If your child is talking about any level of distress, do not hesitate to ask them whether they're feeling changes in their mood or level of stress, or having suicidal thoughts. Asking your child directly about suicide will not increase their risk, or plant the idea. It will create an opportunity to offer support, and let them know you care enough to have the conversation.

You can say, "It sounds like you've been dealing with a lot recently. Does it ever get so tough that you think about ending your life?"

If your child gives any indication they have been thinking about suicide (unless they are in the act of self-harming), take them seriously. Continue to listen and engage in a caring, concerned, supportive manner. You can say things like, "Can you tell me a bit more about it? I'm so sorry you've been feeling this way. I want to understand more about your perspective. I'm here for you no matter what. There is no problem too big that we as a family can't get through. I'm going to keep supporting you and will also make sure you get the help you need to feel yourself again."

Talk with your child about how to seek help. If you fear they may be at risk, get professional help straight away.

Let them know you'll be there for them no matter what, that your love is unconditional, and that you'll help them get the support they need to get through this challenging time.