

Suicide Prevention Toolkit

While it can be difficult to acknowledge that children and teens could actually attempt to end their lives, the heartbreaking reality is that it can and does happen. In fact, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for children and adolescents ages 10-19.

This toolkit is designed to help you understand the warning signs of suicide risk, support you in how to talk to a loved one you think may be experiencing suicidality, and share 15 suicide prevention tips for families.

This resource deals with topics related to suicide. Please take care when reading. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline), go to the nearest emergency room, or reach out to one of the following national resources:

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

Trevor Project: Text START to 678-678

Mental health care is an essential part of suicide prevention. If you're worried about yourself or someone you love, seek support.

Warning Signs of Suicide Risk

Most children and adolescents who take their life exhibit warning signs. Knowing what to look for can save a life.

Warning Signs Indicating Immediate Risk of Suicide

If you notice any of the following, it's important to take immediate action:

- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill or hurt oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Drawing or writing about suicide, or acting out suicide in play
- Giving away cherished personal belongings

Call or text 988 (the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), go to the emergency room, or reach out to one of the national resources shared above.

Warning Signs Indicating Potential Risk of Suicide

If you notice any of the following, pay attention and speak to a mental health professional:

- Aggression
- Reckless or impulsive behavior
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Feelings of sadness or loss of interest
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing from activities
- Talking of being a burden
- Isolating from friends and family
- Decreasing grades in school

These behaviors may indicate a serious risk of suicide, especially if the behavior is new or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.

15 Suicide Prevention Tips for Kids & Families

The best way to prevent suicide is to seek mental health care and support if and when you're worried about or become aware of suicidal ideation, in yourself or your loved ones. Though it may not feel like it, there is help. With appropriate care and treatment, a child suffering from suicidal ideation can learn how to manage stress and adversity, and feel better about life again.

1. Seek mental health care. Suicidal feelings are the result of treatable challenges. Mental health professionals are trained to help! Suicide occurs usually when stressors overwhelm a person who feels pain, hopelessness, and despair. Depression is one of the most common psychiatric disorders associated with suicide.
2. Have open, honest conversations with your children and loved ones. Research shows that asking someone if they have thoughts or a plan to die by suicide doesn't increase their risk or "put an idea in their head." It's actually the opposite; it connects you with your loved one and can open the door to supporting them in getting the help they need.
3. Prioritize time to connect with your family. Building feelings of connectedness through shared activities and emotional support can play an important role in suicide prevention. Close bonds also make it easier to support your loved one in getting mental health support if needed.
4. Proactively limit access to lethal items, like medications, weapons, and firearms. Family members and friends can help maintain a safe environment by locking these items away or removing them from the home.
5. Learn the warning signs of suicide risk. Learn to spot your warning signs early, so you can get support for your family when needed.
6. Create a written plan of action or a "safety plan." Work with a mental health provider to create a written safety plan to refer to in times of crisis or when your child is considering suicide. Your plan is a checklist of activities and actions your child commits to do, to help keep them safe when having thoughts of suicide.

15 Suicide Prevention Tips for Kids & Families (cont.)

1. Pay attention to environmental and social stressors. You can help prevent suicide by being alert to factors that elevate suicide risk, such as bullying, harassment, divorce, unemployment or financial stress, or recent death. We also know that Black and LGBTQ+ children are at significantly increased risk for suicidal thoughts, attempts and death by suicide.
2. Take what they say seriously. If your loved one talks about death, not wanting to live, or suicide, pay attention. These are immediate warning signs of suicide risk. This is true whether they are an adult or a child. Don't assume that children don't understand the importance or meaning of their words.
3. Commit to care. If you or a loved one are in treatment, commit to the care. Take your medications and engage in your therapy (or support them in doing so).
4. Create a list of contacts and resources for when your loved one (or you) feel(s) suicidal. Keep a list of contact names and numbers with people or resources that can help you when you feel suicidal. Include the contact information for your doctors, therapists, and crisis centers or crisis help resources. Include names of family members and friends who have agreed to be part of your safety planning.
5. Join support groups. This can help build connection and make sure that neither you nor your loved ones feel alone.
6. Engage in or encourage physical activity. Moving your body and exercising may reduce depression symptoms and lower risk of suicide. Some examples of physical activities include walking, jogging, swimming, and gardening.
7. Try to do self-care activities. Even if you or your child don't feel like it, it's helpful to engage in self-care activities that can support wellness. This could be reaching out to a friend, taking a walk, getting out of bed and showering.
8. Avoid drug and alcohol use, or support others in doing so. Alcohol and drugs can increase suicidal thoughts, impair thinking and judgement, and increase impulsivity and one's likelihood to hurt themselves.
9. Create a list of the reasons to live. It doesn't need to be perfect, or comprehensive. And it can include "being alive." It doesn't matter what the list includes, but finding a sense of purpose in life can make a difference.

How to Talk with a Young Person about Suicide

Parents and caregivers are often afraid to ask children if they're thinking about or planning to die by suicide. The worry is often that having this conversation and directly asking about suicide can increase the risk of suicide. In fact, the opposite is true. Directly asking a child or teen if they're thinking about ending their life won't "put the idea in their head." The truth is, asking this tough but important question shows love, care, and empathy. It connects you with your loved one, and can open the door to supporting them in getting the help they need.

Here are 3 sample phrases you can use to start the conversation, and modify based on your situation:

- "I've noticed some differences in you lately, and I'm wondering how you're doing. I'm always here to talk to, and I want to know if you're having any thoughts of self-harm or suicide."
- "Given all that you're dealing with right now, and what is happening at school, have you had any thoughts about hurting yourself or thoughts of killing yourself?"
- "I've noticed that you haven't been seeing your friends as much lately, and you're talking about 'life not being worth it.' Have you noticed? I know it's hard to be a teenager. Has suicide ever crossed your mind?"

Mental Health Care and Suicide Risk

Suicidal thoughts and attempts are related to treatable mental health challenges, such as PTSE, depression, and several other conditions. Even though it may feel like it, you're not alone. Seeking help when dealing with suicidal ideation, attempts, and the aftermath is always the better outcome.

At [Little Otter](#), we screen every child for suicide risk using evidence-based screening tools and interventions.

If we identify increased suicide risk, we schedule a 90-minute appointment as soon as possible with the child and parents. We seek to see the family within 24 hours. During that appointment, we conduct an assessment and develop a safety plan with the child and family. We strive to be proactive and alert, so that we don't miss these signs of suicide risk.

By working together, we hope to help reduce the risk of suicide for children who may be suffering. [Learn more and register today.](#)

Resources:

[CDC WISQARS: Leading Cause of Death](#)

[Understanding the Characteristics of Suicide in Young Children](#)

[9 Suicide Risk Factors for Families to Know](#)