



12 Things Parents Can Do to Help Prevent Suicide

As children grow into pre-teens and teenagers, it becomes more challenging for parents to know what they are thinking and feeling. When do the normal ups and downs of adolescence become something to worry about?

Parents and family members can help pre-teens and teens cope when life feels too difficult to bear. Learn about the factors that can increase your child's risks for suicide (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/which-kids-are-at-highest-risk-for-suicide.aspx>) and explore the 12 suggestions below. These steps can help you feel better prepared to offer the caring, non-judgmental support your child needs.



Suicide Prevention | American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)



1. If you see signs that your child's mental health is under threat, tune in.

Maybe your child is just having a bad day, but when signs of mental health troubles last for weeks, don't assume it's just a passing mood. Studies show that 9 of 10 teens who took their own lives were struggling with mental health conditions such as anxiety (</English/tips-tools/symptom-checker/Pages/symptomviewer.aspx?symptom=Anxiety+Attack>). But keep in mind:

- Teens who haven't been diagnosed with any mental health condition may still be at risk. In part, this is because it can be hard to pinpoint mental health issues at early ages.
- Many teens who attempt suicide do not have underlying mental health issues, but in most cases, they will give signs that they're considering ending their own lives.



[Back to Top](#)

Your goal should be to remain calm, alert and ready to speak with your teen. Don't wait for them to come to you. You might start by saying, *"You seem sad. I'm open to talking about this, because I love you and I care what happens to you."* Here are more tips for opening mental health conversations ([/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/How-to-Talk-with-Your-Child-and-Their-Pediatrician-About-Mental-Health-Concerns.aspx](#)) with your child.

2. Listen—even when your child is not talking.

Don't be surprised if your teen turns away when you first raise the subject of mental health or suicide. Keep in mind that, even if your child is silent at first, actions may speak even more loudly than words.

Watch for major changes in your child's sleep patterns, appetite, and social activities. Self-isolation, especially for kids who usually enjoy hanging out with friends or playing sports, can signal serious difficulties. If your child is struggling more than usual with schoolwork, chores and other responsibilities, these are additional signs you shouldn't ignore.

3. Realize that your child might be facing suicide risks you haven't considered yet.

Many parents wonder: Could this really happen to my child? Unfortunately, the answer is yes. Young people of all races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, income levels, and community backgrounds die by suicide every year. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people 10 to 24 years old.

Here are some things that can cause young people to think about ending their lives:

- Loss of a loved one to death, divorce, deployment, deportation or incarceration
- Bullying (in person or online)
- Discrimination, rejection or hostility due to gender identity or sexual orientation
- Racism, discrimination and related inequities and stressors
- Family history of suicide or mental health difficulties
- Stigma (the belief that it's wrong or shameful to talk about mental health or suicide)
- Easy access to firearms or other life-threatening tools and substances
- Witnessing or suffering violence or domestic abuse
- Financial instability that causes worry and insecurity
- Suicide in their school or friend group

Get more perspective on your child's specific risks here ([/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/which-kids-are-at-highest-risk-for-suicide.aspx](#)).

4. Try not to dismiss what you're seeing as "teenage drama."

Never assume your child is exaggerating or playing games if they say or write:

- *"I want to die."*
- *"I don't care anymore."*
- *"Nothing matters."*



wonder how many people would come to my funeral?"

"Sometimes I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up."

[Back to Top](#)

- *"Everyone would be better off without me."*
- *"You won't have to worry about me much longer."*

Many kids who attempt suicide will tell their parents ahead of time (though others do not). These words indicate an urgent need for help.

Don't risk being wrong about this. Take every statement about suicide seriously.

5. Respond with empathy and understanding.

When your child talks or writes about suicide, you may feel shocked, hurt, or angry. You may even want to deny what you're seeing or argue with your child. These feelings are natural and valid, but it's essential to focus on your child's needs first and foremost. Your goal is to create a safe space where your teen can trust you to listen and express concern, but without judgment or blame.

Instead of reacting this way:

- *"That's a ridiculous thing to say."*
- *"You have a great life – why would you end it?"*
- *"You don't mean that."*
- *"I can't believe what I'm hearing!"*

Manage your own feelings so you can respond with empathy:

- *"It sounds like you're in tremendous pain and you can't see a way out."*
- *"Maybe you're wondering how life got this complicated and difficult."*
- *"Right now, you're not sure of the answers to the problems you're facing."*
- *"You must really, really be hurting inside to consider ending your life."*

6. Get professional help right away.

If your teen is self-harming, or you sense they're at risk for attempting suicide, take them to the emergency department of your local hospital. Fast action is crucial when things have reached a crisis point.

If you see signs of suicidal thoughts but don't sense an immediate crisis, you still need to take action. Reach out to your pediatrician or local mental health providers who treat children and teens. Explain what you're seeing and hearing and schedule a mental health evaluation.

Health care providers can help you and your teen create a safety plan (<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/blueprint-for-youth-suicide-prevention/strategies-for-clinical-settings-for-youth-suicide-prevention/brief-interventions-that-can-make-a-difference-in-suicide-prevention/>) that covers:

- Warning signs or triggers your teen feels will lead to suicidal thoughts
- Possible steps to help them cope when they feel triggered
- Sources of support: family, friends, teachers, mentors and others
- Emergency contacts and steps to take if things get worse



7. Remove or secure guns you have at home. Do the same with other lethal tools and substances.

Half of youth suicides occur with firearms—and suicide attempts with firearms are almost always fatal. By far, the safest option is to remove guns and ammunition from your home while your teen is struggling with thoughts of suicide. Many families turn guns over to relatives or other trusted individuals to help safeguard their teen during a vulnerable time.

Safe home storage is the second-best option. Locking and unloading all guns, with ammunition stored and locked in a separate space, does reduce the risk of tragedy – but only if your teen doesn't know the combination to the lock or where the key is hidden. Disassembling guns and storing the components separately and locked is another option.

Of course, guns are not the only means of suicide your child might seek out. Prescription medications and over-the-counter drugs can pose hazards during a suicidal crisis. Families should keep medications locked away and, whenever possible, reduce the volume of medications on hand. Also consider buying over-the-counter medications in blister packs instead of bottles, to slow down access to pills.

Other potentially lethal tools and substances you should consider locking away include:

- Alcohol
- Illicit drugs
- Household cleaners and other poisonous products
- Canned dusting products
- Inhalants
- Antifreeze
- Knives, razors, or other weapons
- Ropes, belts, or plastic bags

The work of removing or locking up these objects and substances may seem daunting, but your child's safety is at stake. Suicide attempts are often impulsive, and a moment of crisis can escalate very quickly. Making sure your teen cannot lay hands on lethal means at the wrong time is critical.

8. As your child enters treatment, focus on creating hope.

Your child's care team will likely recommend a combination of steps to reduce mental health symptoms and thoughts of suicide. Medications, talk therapy, and stress-reducing techniques such as yoga, meditation or journaling may be part of the plan.

Provide realistic reassurance for your child along the way. Remind them (and yourself) that difficult times don't last forever. People do feel better when they receive effective treatment and support.

If your child expresses feelings of stigma or shame, you can remind them that 1 in 5 people have mental health symptoms at some point in their lives. Mental health is part of total health—and seeking help is a sign of self-respect and maturity.

9. Encourage them to see family and friends.

Your child may feel reluctant to spend time with other people, but you can explain that social support will help them feel better. Though more quiet time might be needed at first, gentle encouragement to hang out with family, friends and neighbors will be helpful. Avoid power struggles around specific events or invitations, since your goal is to respect your child's needs and minimize stress.



10. Suggest exercise.

Physical activity (</English/healthy-living/fitness/StopWatch-Tool/Pages/default.aspx>) eases mental health symptoms and supports your child's wellness plan. Whether it's getting outside (</English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/playing-outside-why-its-important-for-kids.aspx>) to take a daily walk, a gym workout, an online exercise class or something else, exercise will:

- Elevate your teen's mood by stimulating the production of endorphins (natural substances in the brain and body that help balance out stress and manage pain).
- Support higher levels of serotonin, another brain-body substance that leads to positive moods and restful sleep.

Experts recommend working out 30 to 40 minutes between 2 and 5 times per week. Any form of exercise is fine. What matters most is that your teen enjoys this activity and feels motivated to do it regularly.

11. Encourage balance and moderation.

Teens in crisis need to go easy on themselves. This means adopting a realistic pace and avoiding experiences that could prove overwhelming.

Reassure your teen that self-care is never a sign of weakness. Everything we do in life is affected by our health, so giving ourselves time to heal is essential. Big tasks can be divided into smaller, more manageable ones, and gradually, as your child's confidence and strength grows, they'll feel ready to take on more.

12. Remind each other that this will take time.

You and your child will benefit from knowing that progress will come at its own pace. Setbacks may happen—they're part of the healing process, too. Encourage your child to be patient and self-forgiving. They've been through a lot, but with the right care and support, you will both see improvement.

Remember

If your child is considering suicide, call or text 988 (<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/988>) **or chat on 988lifeline.org** (<https://988lifeline.org/>) **right away.** The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones.

Ask your teen's care team for other resources you should know about. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Kids-Teens-and-Young-Adults>) has great information.

Parents of LGBTQ2S+ children can visit the Trevor Project (<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>) website for focused resources. Parents and teens facing racial stress can benefit from these strategies and tools (<https://www.apa.org/res/parent-resources/racial-stress>) offered by the American Psychological Association.

You can also visit the American Academy of Pediatrics Blueprint for Youth Suicide Prevention (<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/blueprint-for-youth-suicide-prevention/>) for information about ways to prevent suicide in your community or school.

More information

- Teen Suicide Risk: What Parents Should Know (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/which-kids-are-at-highest-risk-for-suicide.aspx>)
- Ask the Pediatrician: What should I do if my child is thinking about suicide? (</English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/what-should-i-do-if-my-child-is-thinking-about-suicide.aspx>)
- How to Talk About Mental Health With Your Child And Their Pediatrician (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/How-to-Talk-with-Your-Child-and-Their-Pediatrician-About-Mental-Health-Concerns.aspx>)
- Mental Health & COVID-19: Signs Your Child May Need More Support (</English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx>)
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (<https://988lifeline.org/>)



[Back to Top](#)

Last Updated 10/19/2022

Source American Academy of Pediatrics (Copyright © 2022)

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.



[Back to Top](#)