

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Suicide in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents and Caregivers

Definition

Suicide is the act of taking one's own life. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth ages 15-24 and it accounts for 12.3% of all deaths among 15-24 year olds. Approximately 11 parents/caregivers lose a child (between the ages of 15-24) to suicide every day and for every completed suicide by a youth, it is estimated that 100 to 200 attempts are made. Specifically, last year (2005) in Maryland, there were 86 families who lost a child between the ages of 10-25 to suicide. However, building strong family relationships, having the knowledge of the risks and warning signs of suicide/depression, and having access to prevention and intervention resources will often decrease the likelihood of suicide.

Why do we care?

Warning signs may include:

- Depressed mood
- Frequent episodes of running away or being incarcerated
- Family loss or instability, significant problems with parent
- Expressions of suicidal thoughts, or talk of death or the afterlife during moments of sadness or boredom
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Difficulties in dealing with sexual orientation
- No longer interested in or enjoying activities that once were pleasurable
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Impulsive, aggressive behavior, frequent expressions of rage.
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse
- Engaging in high risk behaviors (e.g., fire-setting, involvement in cults/gangs, cruelty to animals).
- Social isolation and poor self-esteem.
- Witnessing or being exposed to family violence or abuse.
- Having a relative who committed or attempted suicide.
- Being preoccupied with themes and acts of violence in TV shows, movies, music, magazines, comics, books, video games, and internet sites.
- Giving away meaningful belongings.

IMPORTANT: Some children may exhibit many warning signs yet appear to be coping with their situation and others may show no signs and yet still feel suicidal. The only way to know for sure is to ask your child and to consult a mental health professional.

What can you do about it?

- **Ask your child directly if he/she is considering suicide.** Ask whether he/she has made a specific plan and has done anything to carry it out. Explain the reasons for your concerns. Listen openly to your child, tell your child that you

- care deeply and that no matter how overwhelming his or her problems seem, help is available.
- **Immediately get your child professional help** from a doctor, community health center, counselor, psychologist, social worker, youth worker, or minister. You can also call 1-800-SUICIDE or look in your local phone book for suicide hotlines and crisis centers.
 - **If your child is in immediate danger, call 911 or take your child to the emergency room.** If your child has a detailed plan or appears acutely suicidal and will not talk, he or she could be in immediate danger and it is important to get help right away. Do not leave your child alone, and seek help immediately.
 - **Learn the warning signs, risks and other factors associated with suicide** especially if your child has made suicidal attempts or threats in the past.
 - **Offer support to your child.** Make sure your child knows that you are there for him/her, encourage him/her to seek you out in times of need, and if you are not there at the time when your child feels depressed or suicidal, have another support person to go to for help.
 - **Secure any firearms or dangerous weapons away from the child and preferably remove them from the house.**

Helpful Forms and Handouts:

- **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**
 - Suicide Prevention and Youth: Saving Lives
<http://www.aacap.org/galleries/LegislativeAction/SuicideH.PDF>
- **National Association of School Psychologists:**
 - Preventing Suicide: Information for Families and Caregivers.
<http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/cq354suicide.aspx>
- **Youth Suicide Prevention Program:**
 - Information for Parents
<http://www.yspp.org/publicAwareness/parents/parentAwareness.htm>

Additional resources:

- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention:** <http://www.afsp.org>
- **Suicide Information & Education Center (SIEC):** <http://www.suicideinfo.ca/>
- **Suicide reference library:** <http://www.suicidreferencelibrary.com/>
- **Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program for Parents:**
<http://www.yellowribbon.org/Msg-to-Parents.htm>

References:

- **National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center:**
<http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/faq/respdepress.asp>
- **Suicide Awareness\Voices of Education (SA\VE):** <http://www.save.org/>

*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.