

If Your Child Has Suicidal Ideation Or Has Threatened Suicide

Thoughts for Parents

There is probably nothing more terrifying than believing that our child has thoughts about suicide, or at least it should be! There is a wide range of reactions on the part of parents, and it is bewildering to begin to know what to do.

Always take threats seriously. Many parents think their child might be saying that they're thinking about suicide to get attention. Be really clear about this! If your child is saying that to get attention, **your child needs attention!** Youth who feel self-assured, loved, self-directed and competent don't make those kinds of statements. This doesn't mean it is your fault. If you think your child is "just doing this for attention" you need to be really clear that the responsible and loving thing that all parents need to do is to immediately seek professional guidance. Your school counselor may be able to provide referrals to local agencies, some of which may offer free or have a sliding fee scale, but you need to reach out to someone who can be sure that whomever your child sees is experienced in being able to determine the level of likelihood that your child will follow through with these thoughts.

Accept the limitations of what a school counselor can provide. Some school counselors have been trained to do suicide assessments and many have not. Your child's school counselor will be honest with you about his/her skill level in this. But students who are having thoughts of or who have attempted suicide have issues that are deeper and more extensive than school counselors can address. It takes more extensive intervention that can be provided at a school. But they'll be able to provide good referrals for you.

Keeping a secret for your child leaves your child at grave risk! Sometimes we feel guilty or ashamed that our child is having this level of difficulty. Sometimes our kids won't tell us something until we promise to keep it a secret. There are lots of reasons that parents have concerns about suicide, yet fail to take action. There is nothing more terrible that can happen to a parent, though, than to lose their son or daughter from having suspected their child needed help and simply hoped that the child would "grow out of it." What we know is that this is more of a pattern than a stage. They don't just get over it and magically find new coping skills. They need help with new ways of thinking.

Why kids do this! By the time a youth speaks of suicide or makes an attempt, it can look like there is a single, identifiable issue, such as a break-up with a girlfriend/boyfriend, failing an important test or not getting into the college of choice. What is nearly always true is that youth have thought about suicide over a much longer period of time, and the current event is more like the straw that broke the camel's back.

One very typical process for kids is that early on – perhaps in third or fourth grade, when something overwhelming happened, the child had a single passing thought of, "If they do that to me again, I could just kill myself, and boy would that show THEM!" And then they go on with their lives. It was just a passing thought that provided a moment of feeling empowered in the midst of an overwhelming moment. They're not at risk of killing themselves at that moment, but their brains have created a thought pathway – a connection of synapses – that seemed to help. So

the next time youth are overwhelmed, that same thought allows them to feel that same little burst of relief or sense of power.

The problem with this is that, from that point on, every the time kids return to that thought, they are NOT learning healthy coping skills for life. Over time, as they get older and life's problems are more overwhelming, they add to their thoughts, such as, "I really COULD kill myself and if I did it, I would use my dad's gun." And now that feels more empowering, so that works for awhile... maybe a few months or a couple of years. And then one day when the problem is really big, the child goes to find the means - dad's handgun, mom's prescription drugs, a rope... And finally they begin actually holding the weapon and taking it into their bedroom to "rehearse." Then one big thing happens - the break-up, the failure, whatever - and it is a very small step for the youth to follow through with this lethal action that started out as a rather innocent thought a long time ago.

The problem is that, often for months or years, the child isn't saying anything out loud, but s/he is practicing a lethal thinking error that often leads to making a plan and finally practicing the plan. As they go along that path, they are also missing the opportunity to learn healthier coping skills. It is a potentially deadly path.

What it takes to save youth from suicide: It takes more than one person to save someone from suicide. The process outlined above is the most common route, but certainly not the only route to child or adolescent suicide. Youth suicide is also linked to depression, which is becoming increasingly common. For some it is that the home is troubled or parents are too busy or unable to connect with their kids in a meaningful way.

With so many possible causes, and because by the time kids are voicing those thoughts they are often fairly far along the path of practicing that thought repeatedly, it takes professional help and support from significant adults in the kids' lives. Nobody can save a kid from suicide alone.

Most people would be surprised to learn how many youth have passing thoughts of suicide at early ages (perhaps 25% of our fourth graders). Many will happen to have an aunt or a teacher or someone else who provides an opportunity to learn healthier coping skills, but we can't leave that to chance. Without help, they may continue down that same path.

Indicators: Youth might make vague threats of suicide or saying things like, "Life isn't worth living," or "Sometimes I think about hurting myself," or "You'll be sorry when I'm gone." They may give away favorite possessions or settle affairs with people with whom they've been in conflict. Some don't give outward signs, so when one does, it is critical to immediately find help.

What to do: Work with your school counselor for a referral, or take your child to a reputable therapist or your local mental health department. Don't wait. Tell your child that you're scared for them and that you know that you want the best help you can find. Tell them you're not going to abandon them to their misery and that you're going to be there for them. The therapist will likely want to work with the child and with you so you can begin to help your child learn new coping skills and learn how best to support their recovery. **Do it!** Join in the process.

And an important fact: A past attempt is the greatest common variable for those who die by suicide. If your child has attempted, s/he needs continued therapy or monitoring for a long time. Don't let down your guard! Act as soon as you have concerns. **Don't wait!**