

Youth Suicide Prevention

Suicide is a leading cause of death among US children, teens, and young adults ages ten to twenty-four. Unfortunately, those rates are rising.

While no single cause has been identified, suicide is often preceded by depression that is undiagnosed and untreated. Most youth show some warning signs or behavior change in advance. Parents and physicians can work together to identify if a child or teen is struggling with depression, anxiety or substance abuse, all of which increase the risk of suicide.

Janet Lee, MD and a Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, indicates “Suicide is complex, but also predictable.” She emphasizes that “When a person talks about killing themselves or feeling helpless or trapped, it should always be taken seriously.”

Asking your child or teen directly about their mental health or if they are contemplating suicide is the best way to know what they are thinking. Studies show it is safe to ask about suicide risk and that asking the question will not put the idea of suicide into their head.

Watch for major changes in your child’s sleep patterns, appetite, and social activities. Self-isolation, especially for kids who normally enjoy hanging out with friends or participating in activities, can signal serious difficulties. “The goal is to create a safe space where your child can trust you to listen and express concern without judgment or blame.” Dr. Lee advises. If a child expresses or exhibits behavior that causes concern about their mental health and stability, it is imperative to show empathy and encourage continued dialog.

Common causes of stress that increase the risk of suicide include major life-changing events, including the loss of a loved one to death, divorce, deployment or incarceration. Bullying, discrimination, racism or stigma surrounding mental health issues can also increase risks. Children who have witnessed or are suffering violence or domestic abuse, engage in self-harming behavior or experienced a suicide in their school or friend group are also at higher risk of suicide.

Research has shown getting immediate access to mental health care when needed is critical for effective intervention and treatment. In addition, fostering close connections to family and friends and facilitating this regular interaction is extremely effective in creating a safe space and a sense of belonging for the child, teen or young adult.

An excellent resource for families to support and encourage their child’s sound mental health habits is HealthyChildren.org. There is a menu of articles with suggestions for dealing with many topics such as, but not limited to: ***Coping with Stress and Violence at Home, Finding Mental Health Care for Your Child, Helping Children Handle Stress, Just Breathe: The Importance of Meditation Breaks for Kids***. Factual information is provided along with ideas on how to engage with your child in discussing the issues.

Suicide is often an impulsive act and in a moment of crisis can escalate quickly. If your child is considering suicide, call or text **988** or **chat on 988lifeline.org immediately**. The Lifeline provides 24/7, free, and confidential support for people in distress, as well as prevention and crisis resources.