

## **SUICIDE PREVENTION: SCHOOL PROCEDURES & TIPS FOR PARENTS**

***If you are concerned about your child, please contact:***

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Suicide is the second leading cause of death among school age youth. However, ***suicide is preventable***. Youth who are contemplating suicide frequently give warning signs of their distress. Parents, teachers, and friends are in a key position to pick up on these signs and get help. Most important is to never take these warning signs lightly or promise to keep them secret. When all adults and students in the school community are committed to making suicide prevention a priority-and are empowered to take the correct actions-we can help youth before they engage in behavior with irreversible consequences.

### **Suicide Risk Factors**

Although far from perfect predictors, certain characteristics are associated with increased odd of having suicidal thoughts. These include:

- Mental illness including depression, conduct disorders, and substance abuse.
- Family stress/dysfunction.
- Environmental risks, including presence of a firearm in the home.
- Situational crises (e.g., traumatic death of a loved one, physical or sexual abuse, family violence).

### **Suicide Warning Signs**

Most suicidal youth demonstrate observable behaviors that signal their suicidal thinking. These include:

- Suicidal threats in the form of direct ("I am going to kill myself") and indirect ("I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up again") statements.
- Suicide notes and plans (including online postings).
- Prior suicidal behavior.
- Making final arrangements (e.g., making funeral arrangements, writing a will, giving away prized possessions).
- Preoccupation with death.
- Changes in behavior, appearance, thoughts and/or feelings.

## What to Do

Youth who feel suicidal are not likely to seek help directly; however, parents, school personnel, and peers can recognize the warning signs and take immediate action to keep the youth safe. When a youth gives signs that they may be considering suicide, the following actions should be taken:

- Remain calm.
- Ask the youth directly if he or she is thinking about suicide (e.g., "Are you thinking of suicide?").
- Focus on your concern for their well-being and avoid being accusatory.
- Listen.
- Reassure them that there is help and they will not feel like this forever.
- Do not judge.
- Provide constant supervision. Do not leave the youth alone.
- Remove means for self-harm.
- **Get help:** No one should ever agree to keep a youth's suicidal thoughts a secret and instead should tell an appropriate caregiving adult, such as a parent, teacher, or school psychologist. Parents should seek help from school or community mental health resources as soon as possible. School staff should take the student to a school-employed mental health professional or administrator.

## The Role of the School in Suicide Prevention

Children and adolescents spend a substantial part of their day in school under the supervision of school personnel. Effective suicide and violence prevention is integrated with supportive mental health services, engages the entire school community, and is imbedded in a positive school climate through student behavioral expectations and a caring and trusting student/adult relationship. Therefore, it is crucial for all school staff members to be familiar with, and watchful for, risk factors and warning signs of suicidal behavior. The entire school staff should

work to create an environment where students feel safe sharing such information. School psychologists and other crisis response team personnel, including the school counselor and school administrator, are trained to intervene when a student is identified at risk for suicide. These individuals conduct suicide risk assessment, warn/inform parents\*, provide recommendations and referrals to community services, and often provide follow up counseling and support at school.

*\* For students 18 and older: Through discussion with the student, the school employed mental health professional will assess whether there is further risk of harm due to parent or guardian notification. If the mental health professional believes, in their professional capacity, that contacting the parent or guardian would endanger the health or well-being of the student, they may delay such contact as appropriate. If contact is delayed, the reasons for the delay will be documented.*

### **Assessment and Referral:**

When a student is identified by a staff person as potentially suicidal, i.e., verbalizes about suicide, presents overt risk factors such as agitation or intoxication, the act of self-harm occurs, or a student self-refers, the student will be seen by a school employed mental health professional within the same school day to assess risk and facilitate referral. If there is no mental health professional available, a school nurse or administrator will fill this role until a mental health professional can be brought in.

For youth at risk:

1. School staff will continuously supervise the student to ensure their safety.
2. The principal and school suicide prevention coordinator will be made aware of the situation as soon as reasonably possible.
3. The school employed mental health professional or principal will contact the student's parent or guardian, as described in the Parental Notification and Involvement section, and will assist the family with urgent referral. When appropriate, this may include calling emergency services or bringing the student to the local Emergency Department, but in most cases will involve setting up an outpatient mental health or primary care appointment and communicating the reason for referral to the healthcare provider.
4. Staff will ask the student's parent or guardian for written permission to discuss the student's health with outside care, if appropriate.

### **Parental Notification and Participation**

Even if a youth is judged to be at low risk for suicidal behavior, schools may ask parents to sign a documentation form to indicate that relevant information has been provided. Parental notifications must be documented. Additionally, parents are crucial members of a suicide risk assessment as they often have information critical to making an appropriate assessment of risk, including mental health history, family dynamics, recent traumatic events, and previous suicidal behaviors. After a school notifies a parent of their child's risk for suicide and provides referral information, the responsibility falls upon the parent to seek mental health assistance for their child. Parents must:

- *Continue to take threats seriously:* Follow through is important even after the child calms down or informs the parent "they didn't mean it." Avoid assuming behavior is simply attention seeking (but at the same time avoid reinforcing suicide threats; e.g., by allowing the student who has threatened suicide to drive because they were denied access to the car).
- *Access school supports:* If parents are uncomfortable with following through on referrals, they can give the school psychologist permission to contact the referral agency, provide referral information, and follow up on the visit.
- *Maintain communication with the school:* After such an intervention, the school will also provide follow-up supports. Your communication will be crucial to ensuring that the school is the safest, most comfortable place for your child.

## **Resiliency Factors**

The presence of resiliency factors can lessen the potential of risk factors to lead to suicidal ideation and behaviors. Once a child or adolescent is considered at risk, schools, families, and friends should work to build these factors in and around the youth. These include:

- Family support and cohesion, including good communication.
- Peer support and close social networks.
- School and community connectedness.
- Cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide and promote healthy living.
- Adaptive coping and problem-solving skills, including conflict-resolution.
- General life satisfaction, good self-esteem, sense of purpose.
- Easy access to effective medical and mental health resources.

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Sources:

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AFSP Model School District Policy

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