



A Suicide Prevention* Guide for Parents and Caregivers

Anyone can experience a mental health problem, including thoughts of suicide.

This guide is designed to help by answering some frequently asked questions so that you can prepare, prevent, and respond if your child is experiencing thoughts of suicide. It has been adapted from *Helping Children and Youth with Suicidal Thoughts*, created by the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, and from a version further contextualized for school board use by the Peel District School Board.

Note: While we use the term "child" throughout, we recognize that the child you are caring for may be a teenager or young adult.

Mental health and wellness promotion is a critical part of suicide prevention. When young people have a range of strategies for:

- staying mentally well,
- recognizing signs of mental health problems,
- asking for help when they are experiencing emotional difficulties,

the risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviours is reduced. A key goal in suicide prevention is to enhance protective factors (i.e., things that are supportive of good mental health) and reduce risk factors (i.e., things that negatively impact mental health). Parents and caregivers can be a strong protective factor for their children.

DISCLAIMER: *This information is not a substitute for consultation with a regulated health professional. If you are concerned about your child, consult your physician or seek emergency services as outlined below*

Help is available for suicide crisis and prevention.

Suicide Crisis Helpline 9-8-8
(call or text 24/7)

There is also:

Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868

Indigenous Hope for Wellness Help Line 1-855-242-3310 or click the link to chat

Black Youth Helpline
1-833-294-8650

For mental health treatment, free of charge, contact **Children's Mental Health Ontario** or **One Stop Talk**.

*Indigenous communities have introduced the term Life Promotion as a way to address suicide prevention. This proactive, holistic, and strength-based approach highlights the importance of culture and wellness. Learn more: <https://wisepractices.ca/>



PREPARE

As a parent/caregiver* of a school-aged child, what are some facts I should know about suicide?

Suicide among young people is tragically common. It is the second leading cause of death amongst youth and young adults.

- About 10% of youth have seriously contemplated suicide, and 3% have attempted suicide.
- It is most often associated with mental health problems like mood disorders, but there are usually many complex factors leading up to a young person thinking about ending their life.
- Rates of suicide are higher for boys, survivors of suicide loss, survivors of a suicide attempt, and those from some First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities. Thoughts of suicide and suicidal behaviour is more common amongst 2S/LGBTQIA+ youth than their non-2S/LGBTQIA+ peers. There is some recent data to suggest increasing rates amongst Black young people. Experiences of racial trauma, homophobia and transphobia, and bullying are risk factors. Protective factors include culture, community, family acceptance, etc.
- Suicidal thoughts can happen to anyone. As a parent, it is good to be knowledgeable and prepared.

What causes young people to think about suicide?

Children and youth can experience thoughts of suicide when they feel overwhelmed and helpless about a situation, disconnected from others, hopeless about the future, etc. It can be related to stresses associated with, for example:

- relationships (conflict, loss of a significant other, bullying, divorce),
- school (pressure to achieve, learning struggles, feeling they don't belong),
- oppression, discrimination and/or feeling unsafe/ unsupported (e.g., experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, ableism, poverty, abuse, etc.),
- mental health concerns (depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, problematic substance use).

What can I do to help my child to stay mentally well?

There are many ways that you can support your child to express and understand their feelings. These practical tips can help:

- Do your best to minimize stress in your household, even when times are tough.
- Make time for connection and fun each day, and spend one-to-one time with your child.
- Teach and show your child ways of coping with stress. Give them space to try and to talk.
- If your child is upset about something, listen and show them that you understand why they would be feeling the way they are, without trying to move too quickly to problem-solving.
- For older children, consider sharing a resource like [Kids' Help Phone](#) or [One Stop Talk](#) where they can find ideas for coping with stress and staying mentally well.
- Help to reduce the stigma about mental health problems by talking openly about this and encourage help-seeking early.

* *In this document the term parent will be used, with the understanding that this resource is also meant for guardians, caregivers, family members, and other caring adults.*



PREVENT

Can talking about suicide with my child put them at greater risk?

Parents and caregivers often worry that discussing suicide and asking directly about thoughts of suicide will put these thoughts into their child's mind. As a result, many parents avoid the topic altogether. **In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that asking someone if they're having thoughts of suicide will increase the risk of developing suicidal thoughts.** Rather, talking about suicide shows your child that you care and that you are there to help them through difficult times. You can give them words for describing difficult thoughts, and you can walk alongside them as they access needed supports and services.

What are some warning signs for suicide?

Warning signs for suicide can be difficult to see, unless you know what to watch for. Look for:

- withdrawing from family and friends
- hopelessness about the future
- talking or writing about suicide or wanting to die
- conveying that they feel overwhelmed, helpless, or out of control
- good-bye gestures, such as giving important belongings away
- changes in behaviour (decline in school performance, acting out, risk-taking, etc.)
- problematic substance use
- inattention to hygiene
- low mood or signs of depression (sadness, irritability, less enjoyment of previously enjoyed activities, difficulty sleeping or eating)

What should I do if I think my child is having thoughts of suicide?

Raising the topic with your child will make it easier for them to confide in you if they are having trouble in this area. Here are some ways to approach this difficult conversation:



Start the conversation: Begin gently, by first asking how your child is feeling. You might begin with some general observations and questions, like "I've noticed you are spending a lot of time in your room, and you seem sad. Are you okay?" Sometimes it is easier to sit side-by-side or be engaged in something else, like drawing or cooking together, to help the conversation seem less intense.



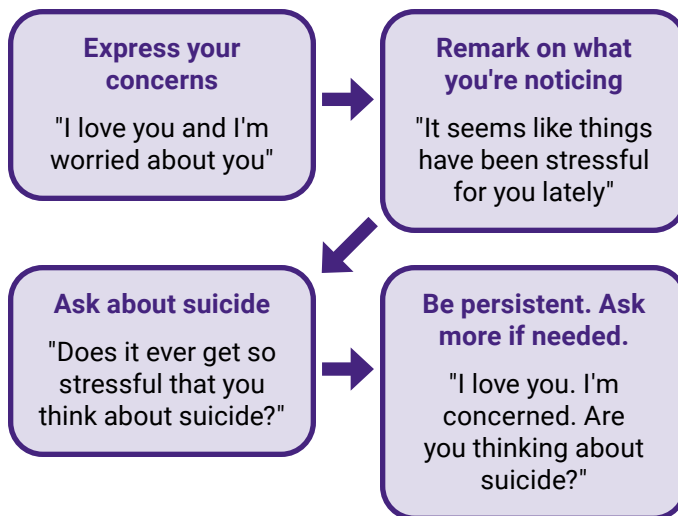
Listen: It's important to give your child a chance to respond to your first question. You might say, "Tell me a bit more about that. It sounds important. I'm starting to understand better."



Ask: Directly ask about suicide. For an older child, you might say, "sometimes, when people are feeling this way, they experience thoughts of suicide. Is that something that is happening for you?" For a younger child, you might say, "sometimes when people are feeling this way, they start to think about hurting themselves. Has that happened for you?" If your child says yes, encourage them to tell you more. If your child says "no", trust your instincts and follow up if needed.



Respond: If your child says 'yes', stay calm and reassure them that you will help them through this. Invite them to tell you more about the thoughts of suicide they have been experiencing.



RESPOND

How can I help my child if they tell me they are having thoughts about suicide?

No matter what your child is going through, reassure them that you love them and that you will get through this together. These practical tips can help:

- Get professional help. You can be a great support, but you are not a therapist. If your child is experiencing thoughts of suicide, they need ongoing care from a trained mental health professional.
- Listen when your child tells you how they are feeling. Thank them for sharing with you and validate their emotions. Avoid comments that may minimize their feelings.
- Ask your child how they want to be supported. Try not to give advice if they don't ask for it.
- Whenever you say goodbye as they leave the house for school etc., talk about the next reunion.
- Help your child to break down a problem into smaller parts, and to tackle one part at a time to make things more manageable.
- Help your child remember how they have overcome other challenges. Remind them how they used their strengths to get through that difficult time. Offer hope and encouragement.

Assure your child that they are not alone.
“We’re in this together. I’m going to help you get through this.”

When people have overcome their feelings of suicide, there is one protective factor that stands out – a supportive relationship with at least one significant other... **That can be you!**

How can I help my child to stay safe at home?

When your child has thoughts of suicide (whether active or not) it's important to make your home a safer place. Active thoughts of suicide mean your child has plans or an intention to end their own life. These practical tips can help:

- Remove firearms and weapons from the home, or make sure they are stored in a secure cabinet with keys held outside the home or hidden. Remove ropes, cords, sharp knives, blades or other means of obvious self-harm. Hide car keys to ensure your child doesn't take the car without you knowing.
- Lock up and monitor all medications, including things like Tylenol and Advil. If your child takes prescription medication, monitor their usage closely. Dispose of any unused medication.
- Remove alcohol from home, as alcohol can impair judgment and increase risk behaviour.
- Make sure your child has developed a safety plan with their mental health care provider. The [“Be Safe” app](#) allows users to create a digital safety plan. An ongoing coping plan can also be helpful. See the **My Coping Plan** worksheet at the end of this document.
- Be mindful of ‘triggers’ and high-risk periods and check in often during these times. Do not leave your child alone for long periods. If you have to go out, take them with you or have someone stay with them.



RESPOND – In a Mental Health Emergency

WHEN URGENT ACTION IS NEEDED

If your child has a suicide plan and intends to act on it right away this is a mental health emergency.

- Do not leave your child alone. Make sure that there is someone with your child at all times, whether it is you or a close friend or family member.
- Immediately contact the Suicide Crisis Helpline (9-8-8), go to the emergency room of your local hospital, or call for an ambulance.

If you discover your child after a suicide attempt, call 911 right away.

- Give first aid if you can. Follow the guidance of the 911 operator.
- Contact someone to go with you to the hospital or to stay with you at home.
- Talk to your child, reassure them, let them know you are there with them.

For an excellent overview on preparing for a mental health emergency, consult the CHEO resource [Helping Children and Youth with Suicidal Thoughts](#).

Mental health emergencies, and particularly those involving suicidal behavior, can leave parents /caregivers with a range of overwhelming emotions. Once you have secured professional help for your child, contact a close family member or friend to support you during this crisis. Think about getting professional counselling support for yourself as well. You can contact ConnexOntario to learn more about services in your area (1-866-531-2600).

To access free, mental health treatment in your area for children, youth and families, including walk-in clinics (virtual & in-person), ongoing counselling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment contact [Children's Mental Health Ontario](#). No referral necessary.

Children and youth can speak with a counsellor by calling Kids Help Phone (24/7) at 1-800-668-6868 / texting [CONNECT](#) to 686868 or [One Stop Talk](#) at 1-855-416-8255.



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

How can I support my child following a death by suicide?

Unfortunately, your child may experience the death of a friend, classmate, or relative by suicide. This may enhance the risk for those who are already having suicidal thoughts but is, of course, upsetting for all who are impacted by this tragic loss. You can help your child through this. It is important to talk about what happened and to make sure your child is okay. These practical tips can help:

- Ask about the impact of the death on them. Find out what they know and provide as much factual information as you can if they have questions or misinterpretations.
- Listen and validate how they feel, letting them know it is normal to have many different feelings (e.g., “You seem both angry and sad that your friend died by suicide. That is hard but a really natural response to something so sudden and tragic.”). No matter what your child says, try to react calmly.
- Let your child know that you are thinking about their well-being, too (e.g., “Given all you are dealing with right now, I wonder if you have thoughts of suicide. You can tell me and we can talk.”)
- As your child grieves, walk alongside (e.g., “I can see you’re in a lot of pain. I’m sorry. Let’s think of what we can do to figure this out. I want to be helpful and I’m here for you no matter what.”)
- If your child seems to need more help in processing what has happened, ask about who their ‘go-to’ sources of support are at school and in the community. List trusted adults they could go to for help if you aren’t there. Inform them about community supports such as [Kids Help Phone](#) (1-800-668-6868 or text “CONNECT” to 686868) or [One Stop Talk](#) (1-855-416-8255).

- Discuss self-care and coping. Ask your child what they do for self-care, or to cope when they’re feeling stressed. Model and discuss your own self-care and personal resiliency strategies.
- Keep the lines of communication open. You could say, “I want you to know that I am always here for you if you want to talk. I promise to listen with an open mind and heart. Is there anything I can do to make myself more available to you?”

How can I work together with my child’s school to keep my child mentally well?

Your child’s school is a partner in supporting student mental health. Specific resources have been created to support educators to ensure a mentally healthy and ongoing caring environment for learning. If you’re concerned about your child’s mental health, or if they are having suicidal thoughts, you can speak to their teacher(s) to ensure coordinated support. These practical tips can help:

- Be specific about your concerns so you and the teacher can figure out the best way to help. Share any information you think may be helpful to the teacher (e.g., approaches that seem to help, specific behaviours you’re noticing).
- Ask the teacher what they’ve noticed at school. Some children may seem fine or show different signs at school. Discuss what you and they are seeing so you each have the full picture.
- Ask about options for ongoing communication so you can share new information with the school.

Working as a team, you can help to ensure the wellness and safety of your child at school.

