

Solutions Newsletter

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Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians, and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Suicide Awareness and Prevention- Maximizing Children's Safety

Students returned to the classroom this fall with a mix of emotions more powerful than the usual melancholy about the ending of summer. After two and a half years of disruption and uncertainty, some students eagerly anticipated a further return to "normalcy" while others faced the new school year with significant distress related to increased academic, social, and behavioral demands.

Children's mental health problems have been steadily increasing over the last decade, prompting the US Surgeon General to issue a rare public health advisory and call to action in December 2021. According to the CDC, in 2019 9% of high school students reported attempting suicide in the prior 12 months compared with 6.3% in 2009, and since the start of the pandemic, there has been a 31% increase in emergency rooms visits for suspected suicide attempts among youth ages 12 to 25. The good news is that despite the spike in suicidal thinking and attempts, youth suicide death rates have stayed consistent since pre-pandemic times.

Despite the understandable fear about recognizing and responding to their children's suicidal urges, parents are far from helpless in their ability to maximize a child's safety. The first step, of course, is to understand and monitor common suicide risk factors:

- A history of depression or other psychiatric conditions and/or of prior suicide attempts
- Verbalizations of suicidality and/or a preoccupation with death
- Expressions of hopelessness, feeling trapped, of being a burden to others
- Giving away possessions
- Mental health or developmental conditions that increase impulsiveness and decrease judgment, such as ADHD, substance abuse, being on the autism spectrum, etc.
- A family history of suicide or knowing someone (e.g., a peer or celebrity) who died by suicide
- Sudden mood changes, including an unexpected shift to an upbeat mood
- Changes in behavior, appearance, or hygiene practices

- A sudden drop in grades or academic engagement and/or an emphasis on perfectionism
- An event or situation that represents a significant blow to self-esteem or a sense of belonging
- A history of trauma, including bullying and sexual/physical/emotional abuse
- Lesbian/gay and other gender non-conforming youth are at higher risk because of stigma, prejudice, discrimination, threats of violence, and other traumatic experiences
- Minority youth are at higher risk due to the burdens of structural racism, intergenerational trauma, and chronic problems with accessing adequate healthcare

It is also critical that parents understand that talking about suicide does not plant the idea in the head of a child who previously had not thought about it. This is just not true. Adults must be direct in asking children about whether they are having thoughts of suicide. If parents and other trusted adults repeatedly raise the hard topics - isolation, depression, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, suicide - children and teens, despite their protestations, will be relieved and know they have allies.

That said, it is also important for parents to develop a sense of community about keeping their children safe. Once a parent becomes aware of one of the above risk factors, it is critical to notify and activate a "team" including school professionals, pediatrician, mental health counselors, a sports coach, or involved family members. Parents should re-acquaint themselves with school-based and community mental health resources and have phone numbers and referral procedures handy.

Finally, parents can improve the safety of their children by encouraging the free expression of all emotions, by regularly inquiring about both mental and physical health, and by keeping academic and other achievements in proper perspective. An over-emphasis on grades, on winning, and on a narrow definition of "success" can put undue pressure on already stressed children and contribute to feelings of hopelessness and low self-worth.