

Children with Suicidal Thoughts

how to talk, listen and offer support

Children sometimes experience difficult and sad feelings that they find hard to explain. In moments of frustration and anger, children may say things like: 'I wish I was dead' or 'If this happens, I will kill myself' to express distress, rage, and frustration.

In some cases, children may use suicidal statements because they have heard adults using them, either at home or on TV; and sometimes they hear it from other kids at school. But how can you tell if a child is truly considering suicide or is only expressing rage and frustration?

The truth is that all signs of suicidal thoughts, ideation or behaviour should be taken seriously and not be dismissed. Even if they are just 'venting'. Giving children the space to reflect about their feelings and understand them is always beneficial. Take a few deep breaths, and calmly try to work out what your child is feeling and thinking. Taking the time to unpack these big emotions together, could be all that your child needs.

Don't be afraid to ask

"Are you thinking about killing yourself/ending your life?"

Asking the question directly will not 'give them ideas' or intensify their thoughts. On the contrary, it will help the child feel heard, seen and cared for, which is a very important thing, as two important contributing factors for suicidal thoughts are feelings of isolation and perceived burdensomeness.

"There is a stigma around suicide, children have a hard time talking about it, afraid people will not understand or think they are weird"

Dr. Samantha Batchelor, senior researcher at Kids Helpline

When is it more than just sadness?

Warning signs

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Lack of interest in their favourite activities
- Self-harming
- Dramatic changes in mood
- Change in eating and or sleeping habits
- Giving away possessions or saying goodbye
- Suicidal ideation (thinking, writing, drawing or talking about suicide or death)
- Feelings of hopelessness and intention to hurt themselves



What to watch out for

Depression is a major risk for suicide in children. Observe if your child is expressing feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, is losing interest in activities they used to enjoy or isolating themselves from family and friends. Other things to watch out for are changes to appetite and/or sleep, and expressions of being a burden.

Check on safety, it is important to understand if the child has plans and means to hurt themselves. Take warning signs seriously, ask questions about how they plan to hurt themselves for example "Do you have a plan to end your life?" If yes, ask details: "What would you do/use?". Then remove the means or restrict access to the method.

How to offer support to your child

- Take warning signs seriously. Seek help immediately if you feel your child plans to go through with a suicide attempt. Call 000 or take your child directly to the hospital Emergency Department.
- Be direct when asking them about suicidal thoughts - Are you having thoughts of suicide?
- Respond with empathy - It sounds like you are in tremendous pain and you cannot see a way out
- Listen and show them you care
- Keep checking on their wellbeing
- Access professional support through a GP, counsellor or psychologist



Protective factors –

support, resources and strengths that help people deal more effectively with stressful events

Supportive and caring parents – as parents, we always try to do the best for our children. You don't have to be perfect. Being present and showing love and care goes a long way. It also helps to parent in a way that provide security, appropriate boundaries and support their development

Sense of belonging – when children have positive and stable relationships and live in a safe environment, they are more likely to feel confident and thrive

Positive school environment – being accepted by peers and feeling appreciated plays a big role in a child's general wellbeing

Participation in groups – when children take part in group activities, spend time with friends and become more active, they tend to have an increased feeling of connectedness and enhanced self-esteem

Healthy/positive coping strategies – when children have helpful ways to manage challenging feelings, thoughts, and memories they are more resilient and less likely to develop suicidal thoughts. These skills don't come naturally to everyone, but it can be learned. Adults and children can learn to master new, healthy strategies together

Seek professional help

Whether you suspect that your child is struggling with depression or having suicidal thoughts, it is always a good idea to talk to a professional. You can start by taking your child to a GP who will be able to refer your child to the most appropriate assessments and treatments.

Also, remember to look after yourself. The thought of a child dying by suicide is confronting and it may make us feel powerless. You are not alone. Always be kind to yourself and seek professional support if you need it.

Services and supports

Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800)

Free confidential 24-hour telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Websites offering information, stories, online activities and online counselling. For kids: www.kidshelpline.com.au/kids for teenagers and young adults: www.kidshelpline.com.au/teens

Lifeline (13 11 14)

A 24-hour national telephone crisis counselling service. Online counselling service, further information and service finder – www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service (1300 659 467)

24-hour national telephone counselling service to people 18 years and over who are suicidal or bereaved by suicide. Online counselling service, grief and loss program and resources about bereavement – www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

National Stand By Response Service

24-hour coordinated community response service to families, friends and communities who have been bereaved through suicide – www.unitedsynergies.com.au

CAHMS - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service:

1800 048 636

MHERL - Mental Health Emergency Response Line -

Perth metro: 1300 555 788

Peel: 1800 676 822

Rurallink (Regional/Remote WA): 1800 552 002