

SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Suicide is the third leading cause of death in the young in the United Kingdom (traffic accidents and cancer being the first and second). Yet, adults are often surprised and horrified that children can and do kill themselves.

Why do they do it?

We can never know all the causes, but it may be that the child or young person is:

- depressed because of social problems with friends
- worried about school pressures and examinations
- concerned about family problems
- being bullied
- a victim of child abuse
- overwhelmed by the world situation
- experiencing a chemical imbalance
- having a drug or alcohol related problem
- influenced by another suicide story
- trying to make life easier for someone
- trying to escape from an impossible situation
- trying to get help for some problem
- trying to manipulate someone to gain love
- trying to punish someone for hurting them
- acting on sudden, inexplicable impulse
- putting pressure on themselves
- taking a prescribed drug that has given them a bad reaction
- using this as a misguided way to get recognition online
- influenced by an internet suicide chatroom or by 'friends' online
- influenced by the death of a friend or family

Possible indicators:

The following are common characteristics of many people who commit suicide:

- experienced the loss of a loved one through divorce or death
- overly sensitive to emotional pain or upheavals
- unable to find friendship or security
- unable to deal with problems and feel hopeless
- convinced that suicide is the only solution
- given indications or said that they wished to die

What to look for:

Although some children may not give any indication that they are considering suicide, be aware of the following signs – usually in combination:

- change in eating or sleeping patterns
- loss of interest in activities usually enjoyed
- irritability, sadness, hopelessness
- loss of energy; feeling tired and listless
- unable to concentrate or sudden poor school performance
- restless, pacing type of behaviour
- excessive self blame for everything
- expressions of self hate
- continued thoughts of suicide or death
- giving away precious possessions
- spending hours online in depressing or suicide sites
- posting ‘memorials’ to young friends who have died, especially by suicide

Most of these signs could be due to other causes, but if a child or young person is exhibiting three or four of these consistently over a period of a week to ten days, there is cause for concern. Often young people who try to kill themselves don't really want to die and do not understand the finality of death.

What to do:

If a child talks about suicide, TAKE IT VERY SERIOUSLY. There is a myth that ‘talking about suicide means the person won't do it.’ People who talk about suicide sometimes do kill themselves. Immediately seek help through your local Child Guidance Clinic or one of the Help organisations listed at the end of this leaflet.

- encourage them to talk by saying: “I'd like to hear about it”.
- give the child a chance to be alone with you, but don't “hover”
- be direct: “I'm worried about you”
- set limits – they help children feel secure
- help find the child find solutions / offer alternatives
- don't force a child into an impossible situation. It may result in them feeling that suicide is the only escape. For example, severe bullying might make going to school a nightmare. If you cannot get the school to address the problem, either change schools or educate the child at home.
- trust your own judgements
- remove means of suicide if possible
- tell others and seek professional help. Don't try to cope alone
- encourage children to eat and sleep properly
- encourage physical or recreational activity to release tension
- role play with them to cope with situations
- encourage crying, deep breathing exercises, laughter, listening to music, drawing, relaxation techniques, teach positive assertion skills
- be especially diligent if a friend of your child commits suicide

- monitor your child's online activities and learn how to find out if they have accessed suicide websites
- teach problem solving skills, explaining how to find alternatives and to foresee consequences. Explain that simply because you can't see a solution to a problem, it doesn't mean that there isn't one.
- Build up a child's self - confidence. Find something the child is good at and praise him/her.

***The ten best things you can say to your child:**

- 1) You've always been a plus in my life
- 2) I'm proud of you...
- 3) It's alright to cry or feel scared or sad
- 4) It's OK to make mistakes
- 5) Please tell me if something is bothering you
- 6) You're clever
- 7) I care enough about you to say "No"
- 8) You don't have to *do* anything – you can just be
- 9) I like you just the way you are
- 10) I love you. Tell them often that they matter to you and that you love them. Even if they don't feel good about themselves, it might help them to know that they are important to someone else.

*taken from "501 Ways to be a Good Parent" by Michele Elliott

Help Organisations

Kidscape offers a helpline for parents of bullied children and free leaflets for children and parents, as well as courses on assertiveness for children 08451 205 204

The Samaritans offer a twenty - four hour help line for anyone with suicidal problems, or for anyone who wants to talk. Some branches have drop – in centres. See your local telephone directory or telephone 0345 909090.

Young Minds a service for anyone concerned about the mental health of a young person. Telephone 0800 0182138.

Childline is a twenty – four hour helpline for children and young people up to the age of 18 in distress 0800 1111

The British Association of Counselling can be contacted for a list of help organisations and counsellors in your area. Send a large s.a.e. to 1, Regent Place ,Rugby, Warwickshire.CV21 2PJ.

Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222.