
Risk Factors for Suicide in Kids and Teens

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As a clinician who has completed psychiatric assessments in the Emergency Department and now teaches suicide prevention, I believe knowing the warning signs of suicide can be helpful for parents in addressing the needs of their child. These warning signs can encourage us to tune-in and ask questions so that we can offer help when it is needed.

However, to gain a more complete picture, it is also important to understand their potential risk factors.

Suicide is highly complex and cannot be attributed to a single cause. A combination of health, environmental and historical factors contribute to the risk, but are not necessarily direct causes.

The more risk factors a person has, the greater their risk may be for suicide. While suicide can affect people of all ethnicities, ages, genders and socioeconomic levels, certain characteristics are found in higher frequency among people who die from suicide. Some of those common risk factors are as follows:

Risk Factors for Suicide

Health

- Abuse of substances
- Chronic pain, serious or chronic medical conditions
- Mental disorders (depression, anxiety, bipolar disorders)

Environmental

- Major stressful events (divorce, death, abuse/trauma)
- Prolonged stress (bullying, harassment, relationship issues, job loss)
- Exposure to another suicide
- Access to lethal means (firearms, drugs)
- Challenges related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity in an unsupportive environment
- Unwillingness to seek help or other barriers to care

Historical

- Has attempted suicide before, or
- Has a family member who has attempted or died by suicide

Teens who are contemplating suicide often fall into several categories above, or follow a similar pattern, such as already having a mental health disorder, beginning to abuse alcohol or drugs, having access to lethal means, and/or were exposed to a stressful life event or another suicide.

It is important to note that teens are not the only group of children who are capable of suicide ideation. Young children are capable of suicidal thoughts and can act on them as well.

If you are sensing a pattern or noticing that your child falls into a few of the above categories, then ask about it in a nonjudgmental way.

Don't be afraid to ask your children directly if they are having thoughts of suicide. You are not going to give them an idea that they didn't already have. If you need some help, please visit our website for more information about how to support your child:

www.cincinnatichildrens.org/service/p/psychiatry/resources

While it is difficult for parents to consider the possibility that their children are capable of attempting suicide, I can assure you that children and teens who are having thoughts of suicide often feel relieved when someone who cares about them asks them about it. Sometimes they just need someone else to open the door to that conversation.

If you are concerned about a loved one's safety, please visit our Suicide Prevention page:

www.cincinnatichildrens.org/patients/suicide-prevention