



Our Young Children & Suicide Prevention: A Brief for Parents and Caregivers

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Learning that your elementary-aged child is thinking about self-harm or using language that signals suicide is frightening and disorienting. Thankfully, suicide is preventable and there are many things that parents and caregivers can do to help keep their children safe. This Brief, a complement to the more detailed resource, "[Our Young Children & Suicide Prevention: A Resource for Parents and Caregivers](#)" is designed to help parents and caregivers prevent suicidal thoughts and behaviors (STBs), recognize the warning signs of STBs, and, when necessary, intervene early and effectively to keep their children safe.

Recognizing signs of STBs in young children

Elementary-aged children may express their pain in different ways than teens or adults, so it's important to learn the warning signs that a child is in distress. Some warning signs of STBs in young children include:

- **Fatigue, loss of energy, and/or sleep disruptions.** Your child may seem overly tired and display a loss of energy. They may experience sleep disruptions, including difficulty falling asleep and/or staying asleep, or sleeping more than usual.
- **Talking, writing, drawing, or using toys to enact scenes about death.** The subject of the conversation, writing, or artwork may be your child's self, loved ones or pets, or fictional characters.
- **Statements indicating hopelessness.** Your child may make statements such as "I wish I could disappear" or "I hate my life."



Responding Effectively: What parents and caregivers can do when they notice warning signs of STBs in their young child

If you come to learn about warning signs of STBs with your child, the first thing to do is to check in with yourself. Before doing anything else, take a few moments to find your footing. After bringing yourself into a calm space, talk with your child about your concerns.

- **First, assure your child that they are not in trouble.**
- **Prepare yourself to use the following communication strategies:**
 - Be attentive. Put distracting objects like phones and computers away and give your child your full attention.



- Listen carefully. Try to listen without planning your response. Stay focused on what your child is saying.
- Be curious. Show curiosity about your child's experience by asking open-ended questions (questions that aren't answered with yes or no responses) and asking follow-up questions that show you are trying to understand how they think and feel.
- Affirm and validate. Affirm your child's thoughts and feelings. Avoid challenging their recollections or perceptions of events. Instead, validate their experience and encourage them to continue sharing.



- **Then, using developmentally appropriate, matter-of-fact language, and ask direct, questions, such as:**

- "I know you've been really sad. Sometimes when people are super sad, they have thoughts about hurting themselves. Have you ever thought about hurting yourself?"
- "Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself now? Are you having thoughts of killing yourself?"
- "What are you thinking about doing to hurt yourself?"



- **If after you've had conversations with your child you learn that your child has a plan to hurt themselves or has tried hurting themselves, your child may be in crisis. Do the following:**

- Supervise your child at all times. Do not punish your child. Do not use any discipline strategies that involve isolating your child without supervision, such as sending them to their room alone.
- Secure your home environment. The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry provides guidance for [keeping your home environment suicide safe](#). Some examples include:
 - Secure all medications in a lockbox
 - Remove guns or other weapons from the home
- Immediately alert appropriate medical professionals to the nature of your child's STB-related crisis. These professionals have the appropriate training to guide you on the next steps.
 - Alert your child's mental health provider.
 - Alert your child's pediatrician.
 - If your child is not under the care of existing medical providers or their providers cannot be reached, take your child to an emergency room.
- After you have secured your child's immediate safety, alert trusted professionals at your



child’s school. The school will need to have a plan in place to protect your child’s safety in the school environment. If your child has missed school because of a mental health crisis, the school will want to work with your family to make accommodations to support your child’s healthy return to school.

- Plan for ongoing mental health care for your child. Finding the right mental health clinician for your family may be challenging, **but don’t give up!** Try multiple routes to find the right clinician. Consider the following:
 - Ask for recommendations from a school social worker, school counselor, or school psychologist at your child’s school.
 - Contact your child’s primary medical provider for referrals.
 - Contact your health insurance company for referrals to in-network providers.
 - Search Psychology Today’s [online resource](#) for finding a therapist in your local area
 - Call 211 for resources or search the [SAMHSA treatment services locator \[findtreatment.org\]](#)

Attentive and Supportive Parents and Caregivers Can Make a Difference

Parents and caregivers are powerful sources of strength in their child’s lives. By cultivating preventive supports in their homes, becoming knowledgeable about STB warning signs, and building skills and confidence for responding swiftly and effectively to the presence of STBs, parents and caregivers can successfully limit the impact of STBs on the lives of their children.

Suicide Prevention Hotlines and 24/7 Text and Chat Lines

Hotlines	24/7 Text and Chat Lines
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-TALK (8255) or dial 988. • The Trevor Project (LGBTQ+ youth): (866) 488-7386 • National Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-7233 • Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: (800) 422-4453 • National Alliance on Mental Illness HelpLine: (800) 950-NAMI (6264) or Text 62640 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 • Lifeline Chat: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat

For additional, in-depth guidance, please refer to the complete resource:

O’Malley, M., Marion, F., Palacio, J., & Gomez, J. (2023). Our Young Children & Suicide Prevention: A Resource for Parents and Caregivers. Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC).