



## SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS



Before jumping to suicide warning signs, let's talk about the factors that might place your child at risk for suicide. First, let's get an understanding of what we mean by 'risk factors'. These are situations, experiences or personality traits that could put your child at a greater risk for suicide than their peers. An analogy to make it easier to understand is thinking about the concept of risk factors for heart disease. They don't predict a person will have a heart attack, just that their level of risk for one is higher than the general population. It usually points us in the direction of what to do for prevention of heart disease. Risk factors for suicide are similar in that they give us targets for prevention.

### When we think about risk factors for youth suicide, here's some of the things that stand out for younger children:

- Mental health problems including attention deficit disorder (ADD), anxiety and depression. The impulsivity that often characterizes ADD or ADHD helps you understand why this may increase a child's risk.
- Previous suicide attempts which incorporate suicide into a child's available list of coping strategies. It's easier to consider as a solution if you've tried it before.
- A family history of mental health issues or suicidal behavior. This may be related to genetics and/or social modeling [e.g., Thinking that when things get tough, you can always take your life like another family member did.]
- History of physical or sexual abuse which may increase feelings of hopelessness and contribute to a negative self-image.
- Exposure to violence which could decrease feelings of personal safety and control and increase feelings of anger and hopelessness.

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The warning signs of suicide in younger children are usually subtler or less noticeable than they are in older youth. These signs in younger children could include:

- Withdrawing
- Having crying spells or temper tantrums
- Becoming less verbal
- Displaying a lack of interest in familiar activities



As with older children, you want to pay attention to whether these are changes from your child's typical behavior. For example, if your child has always had a tendency to respond to disappointment or feedback by having a temper tantrum, you probably wouldn't consider that in the warning signs category.

Signs that indicate your child may be in some type of emotional distress that may be reported by the school include:

- Frequent visits to school nurse
- Frequent restroom requests
- Actual threats or suicide notes
- Talking about suicide or death
- Disturbing themes in school assignments
- Asking to go home from school early
- Changes in mood, for example, no longer cheerful or suddenly cheerful, or suddenly sullen or aggressive
- Changes in eating habits
- Student isolated on school bus, or in the cafeteria
- Bullying behavior - even as a bystander



So, what do you do if you notice behaviors at home or get reports from schools that indicate your child may be having a hard time and possibly be at risk for suicide?

- First, don't panic! There could be a lot of reasons for the changes in your child's behaviors other than suicide risk. Recognizing these could open up avenues for prevention strategies, similar to what we talked about in the heart attack analogy. Take a deep breath and remind yourself it's good fortune that you have been given the chance to intervene before the situation got really bad.

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- Speak to your contacts at the school to get a better understanding of why they are concerned. Even if what they say doesn't seem serious to you, remember schools have lots of experience with kids and they wouldn't raise an alarm if they didn't think there was a reason to be concerned.
- Talk with your child. Explain the specific behaviors or changes that have you concerned and that what you've seen or the school has noticed 'just isn't like them'. Ask them what's going on. Be patient with a silent response; for some children, talking about how they're feeling may seem like you're asking them to speak a foreign language. Also ask them if there's anything you can do to help them. By phrasing it this way, you are demonstrating that your child isn't alone in their possible distress and you'd like to be a part of a solution to get them back on track. This may make it easier for them to talk with you at another point in time.
- Just to be on the safe side, remove any items from your home that your child could use to hurt themselves. This includes firearms, and prescription and over the counter medications. Consider knives, scissors, and other sharp items as well. Put them in a place your child cannot get access to and keep them stored away until your child no longer seems at risk.
- Follow up with both the school and your child. If you still are concerned about what you're hearing or sensing, ask the school or someone else you trust like your pediatrician to recommend a local mental health resource who may be able to get to the bottom of things.
- If you do hear something, or sense something, that tells you your child may be in immediate danger, go to your local emergency room right away. There's a reason people say: "better safe than sorry!"

