

What Can Parents Do?

Parents can become informed about the warning signs of suicide that they may see in their teens or their teens' friends. These are general signs that a teen may be troubled. There is no list of definite, specific signs that a teen may be thinking about hurting himself or herself. Parents should not hesitate to err in the direction of over- versus underreacting. Warning signs are listed on the FACTS sheet you received.

In addition to these warning signs, parents should monitor teens' computers to see if they are accessing or developing Web sites with themes of death or destruction.

It is important to understand that suicide is a **crisis in communication**. When you sense that your teen is troubled, what will probably help the most is to have already established helpful patterns of communication. Here are ways to establish and maintain communication between you and your teen:

1. Create occasions for communication.

- No TV during dinner.
- At times, no radio in the car.
- Do chores together.
- Stop by just before bedtime—teens are more relaxed and less guarded at this time.
- Share information about your day and feelings. (Often parents don't engage in small talk with their kids. Instead most of their communication consists of questions and "tidying up" kids' behavior.)
- Find common interests/activities.

2. When you talk with your teen:

- Really listen.
- Try to understand his or her viewpoint first, before trying to provide an alternate viewpoint.
- Accept your teen's feelings and concerns rather than evaluate. (Avoid statements such as "You shouldn't get upset over that!" and "If you had made a decision earlier, this wouldn't have happened!")
- Don't minimize. (Avoid statements such as "Everyone feels that way." and "Don't let little things like that get to you.")
- Recall that your teen sees his or her experience as unique. Acknowledge this and then let him or her know that others may have also struggled with these concerns.

- Don't compare your teen with siblings, other kids, or your childhood.
 - Don't overreact. (Avoid statements such as "How could you think something like that?")
 - Pause; take a deep breath and listen.
 - Have definite standards and limits, but follow the rule of minimum conformity. That is, decide on the absolute minimum requirements for behavior, talk, dress, and so forth, and let the rest go. You can't enforce these anyway, and the more requirements you have, the less influence you have.
3. Be aware of the pressures and expectations you place on your child. Clearly, kids must learn to stick it out and develop discipline, but each achieves in his or her own way and at different paces. It is difficult to walk the line between preparing kids for life's pressures and adding too much pressure of your own in regard to school, sports, achievement, appearance, manners, and so forth.
 4. Be aware of demands kids place on themselves. This may be a very important source of stress for teens.
 5. Follow this simple rule from Dr. Hiam Ginott, author of *Between Parent and Child*:
 "Acknowledgment always precedes advice or directives." (For example, "I know that college was very important to you and I can see this is very upsetting, but let's look at some other alternatives." or "I see that Tom meant a lot to you. This is hard, but I'm wondering if you're not being a bit hard on yourself.")

If your child seems troubled or makes a seemingly out-of-the-blue comment about harming himself or herself, don't worry about taking it too seriously. Sit your child down, let him or her know of your concern, and say that you would rather overreact than underreact and that you will always respond to such behavior or statements.

If you are unsure of how to respond to your child, talk to another adult whom you trust: another parent, school personnel, clergy or religious leader, or a mental health provider. Then decide on a specific course of action.

Remember that it is difficult for parents to imagine that their teens could feel so bad that suicide is a possible alternative. But recall that parents of teens who have died by suicide all say that they also felt this way, and they urge parents to listen and take action.

The final point in regard to parents' responsibilities has to do with two facts: (1) much of teen suicide is more impulsive than adult suicide, and (2) the primary method of teen suicide is firearms. Thus, restricting access to means is an important way to prevent suicide. For now, this may mean keeping firearms locked up, but this is not foolproof. Clearly, if a teen is depressed or anxious, or is exhibiting impulsive behavior, guns should be removed from the house.