

10 Tips for Preventing Suicide in Our Children: A guide for parents and caregivers

1. Take a deep breath. Don't freak out.

Nothing scares kids more than their parents losing it. So, if they confess to thoughts of suicide or an attempt, shore up everything you have and remember they are there in front of you now and alive. Not all of us get that opportunity.

2. Listen more, lecture less.

Meet them where they are and allow them to feel heard. The magic phrase is, "Tell me more. I am listening." Don't suggest fixes but ask questions instead. "How long have you felt this way?" "Did you have a plan?" "How were you planning to end your life?" "How can I help?"

If they talk about a recent breakup, don't talk about how you got over one year ago but instead empathize with where they are now and say things like, "I can tell you invested a lot of yourself in this relationship. I can see this is painful for you. Keep talking. I'm listening."

3. Don't dismiss their feelings, their confessions of pain and thoughts of suicide.

Take every threat seriously. Be prepared to ask "Are you thinking of suicide?" Avoid statements like "You have so much to live for," "You are just trying to get attention," or "Just pray on it." No one in this vulnerable state wants to be judged.

4. It's not just their recovery it's ours too.

If you have a child who is struggling and as a result you are too, be a good role model by seeking support for yourself knowing you don't have all the answers and you need to be educated. You are setting a standard that asking for help is OK. They might not do it right now, but they will eventually. Support group? Therapist?

5. Ask questions.

This helps build resilience and coping skills. Be curious and get them thinking by asking them questions. For example, if they are bummed about a bad test score, simply ask what they might do differently next time. Don't judge but rather allow them to try their ideas and learn from them. Don't offer suggestions without being asked. It's OK to say, "Do you want any ideas from me?" If they say no, just say, "I have confidence you will work through this and I am here to listen. And if I lecture, let me know so I can break the habit with your help."

6. Ask for their advice.

It shows you have confidence they can problem solve. You don't have to do what they suggest but you can consider and reflect on it and later follow up with, "I thought about your suggestion about so and so...."

7. Don't project scenarios that have not happened.

Catastrophizing has never helped anyone. Acknowledge or make a joke to yourself about it using your own first name. For example, I'd say, "Anne Moss, just because you've not gotten a text back doesn't mean they are hooked up in the ICU somewhere."

8. Be vulnerable.

Share your own feelings and how you are going to manage them. Admit you don't have all the answers, but you are there to be a partner to support them and help them find those answers. Ask them how you might help and respect their boundaries, too.

9. Give your kids agency.

It's hard to watch your child suffer but doing everything for them can serve to fragilize your child and prevent the development of healthy coping strategies which are protective factors against suicide. Along the way listen to their fears and take them seriously presenting ways they can take the lead on finding out the answers that will address those fears.

For example, ask: "So you mentioned not wanting to go to the psychiatrist. What worries do you have about that visit?"

Your Child: "I am afraid the medication will take away my creativity."

Your response: "That's valid. It would concern me, too. How about let's keep the appointment to keep our options open and you ask the psychiatrist that question as I'd like to know the answer, too. And let's see what they have to say and I want to know how you feel about it. I don't want anyone forcing us into something that is not helpful."

10. Collaborate with the school counselor and your physician.

Work with your school and allow your child to be part of that solution. Being combative with your school won't help you or your child.

Some parents are outraged at the school because their child is being bullied and they demand an end to it. Keep in mind, it's likely the bullying is happening at home through social media, too so have you found it easy to stop since that's on your turf? Probably not. It's not that easy to end it and takes effort from everyone involved including the one who is bullied. Bullying has existed since there have been parents and children. Your kids are likely to be bullied as adults, too so this is an opportunity, albeit a painful one, to try some strategies and build resilience. If it gets bad, then you can work with the school on a transfer.

You can't fix another person. You can only fix yourself and be empathetic, understanding, and supportive for another. And do appreciate the value of listening with empathy and being there for someone. Allowing another person to feel heard, especially your child, is one of greatest gifts you can offer.