



A Suicide Prevention Guide for Parents and Families During COVID-19 and Return to School

Individuals and families have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in unique and varied ways. For some, significant changes to daily routines, a sense of isolation and loss, and various other factors may have led to new or increased mental health concerns. Anyone can experience a mental health problem, including thoughts of suicide. This guide is designed to help by answering some frequently asked questions so that you can prepare, prevent, and respond if your child or teen is experiencing thoughts of suicide. It has been adapted from *Helping Children and Youth with Suicidal Thoughts* created by the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and from a version further contextualized for school board use by Peel District School Board.

DISCLAIMER: *This information is not a substitute for consultation with a regulated health professional. If you are concerned about your child, consult your physician or seek emergency services as outlined below.*

Help is available for suicide crisis and prevention.

Call 9-1-1 or get support from a local crisis centre.

There is also:

Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868);

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line (1-855-242-3310); and the

Canada Suicide Prevention Service (1-833-456-4566), that all offer 24/7 support.

For mental health treatment, free of charge, contact **Children's Mental Health Ontario**.



PREPARE

As a parent* of a school-aged child, what are some facts I should know about suicide?

- Suicide amongst young people is tragically common. It is the second leading cause of death amongst youth and young adults.
- About 10% of youth have seriously contemplated suicide, and 3% have attempted suicide.
- It is most often associated with mental health problems like mood disorders, but there are usually many complex factors leading up a young person thinking about ending their life.
- Rates of suicide are higher for boys, survivors of suicide loss, survivors of a suicide attempt, and for those from some First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities. Thoughts of suicide and suicidal behavior are more common amongst LGBTQ2S youth than their non-LGBTQ2S peers.
- Suicidal thoughts can happen to anyone. As a parent, it is good to be knowledgeable and prepared.

What causes young people to think about suicide?

Children and youth can experience thoughts of suicide when they feel overwhelmed and helpless about a situation, disconnected from others, hopeless about the future, etc. It can be related to stresses associated with, for example:

- relationships (conflict, loss of a significant other, bullying, divorce),
- school (pressure to achieve, learning struggles, feeling they don't belong),
- oppression, discrimination and/or feeling unsafe/unsupported (e.g., experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, ableism, poverty, abuse, etc.),
- mental health concerns (depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, problematic substance use).

- For some children and youth, the stress of COVID-19, school closures, social isolation, instances of systemic racism and injustice and/or the anticipated return to school has increased the risk for suicidal thoughts. At this vulnerable time, it's important to be watchful and ready to provide caring support.

What can I do to help my child to stay mentally well?

Life during the COVID-19 pandemic can be very stressful and all of the unknowns and worries can add up. You can help your child to understand their feelings, and can navigate these times together, to leave them feeling more confident and hopeful. These practical tips can help:

- Do your best to minimize stress in your household, even when times are tough.
- Make time for connection and fun each day and spend one to one time with your child
- Teach your child, and show them, ways of coping with stress. Give them space to try, and to talk.
- If your child is upset about something, listen and show them that you understand why they would be feeling the way they are, without trying to move too quickly to problem-solving.
- For older children, consider sharing resources like [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#) and [Kids' Help Phone](#) where they can find ideas for coping with stress and staying mentally well.
- Visit the [COVID-19 / Return to school](#) section of our website for more information related to mental health and COVID-19.

* In this document the term parent will be used, with the understanding that this resource is also meant for guardians, caregivers, family members, and other caring adults.



PREVENT

Can talking about suicide with my child or teen put them at greater risk?

Parents often worry that discussing suicide and asking directly about thoughts of suicide will somehow put these thoughts into their child's mind. As a result, many parents avoid the topic altogether. ***In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that asking someone if they're having thoughts of suicide will increase the risk of developing suicidal thoughts.*** Rather, talking about suicide in good ways shows your child that you care, and that you are there to help them through difficult times. You can give them words for describing difficult thoughts, and you can walk alongside as they access needed supports and services.


What are some warning signs for suicide?


Warning signs for suicide can be difficult to see, unless you know what to watch for. Look for:


- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Hopelessness about the future
- Talking or writing about suicide or wanting to die
- Conveying that they are overwhelmed, helpless, or out of control
- Good-bye gestures, such as giving important belongings away
- Changes in behaviour (decline in school performance, acting out, risk-taking, etc.)
- Problematic substance use
- Inattention to hygiene
- Negative mood or signs of depression (sadness, irritability, less enjoyment of previously enjoyed activities, difficulty sleeping or eating)


What should I do if I think my child or teen is having thoughts of suicide?

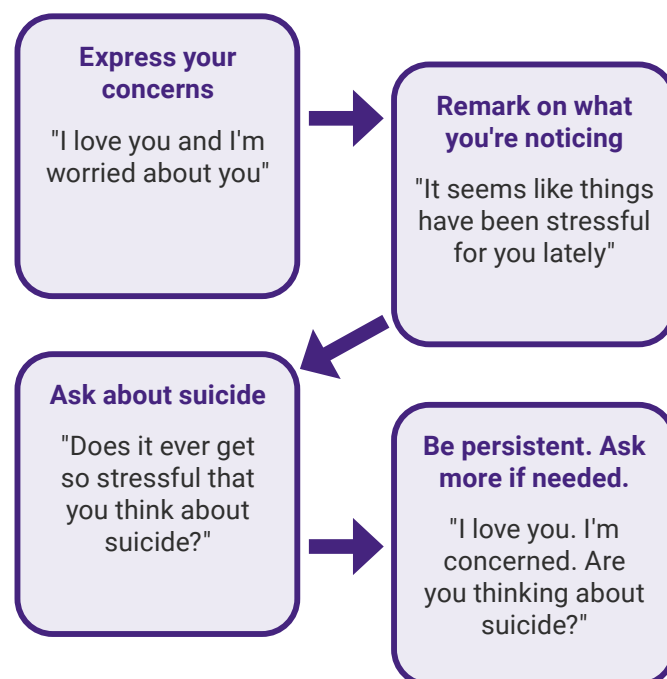
Raising the topic with your child will make it easier for them to confide in you if they are having trouble in this area. Here are some ways to approach this difficult conversation:

 **Start the conversation:** Begin gently, by first asking how your child or teen is feeling. You might begin with some general observations and questions, like "I've noticed you are spending a lot of time in your room and you seem sad. Are you okay?"

 **Listen:** It's important to give your child or teen a chance to respond to your first question. You might say, "Tell me a bit more about that. It sounds important. I'm starting to understand better."

 **Ask:** Directly ask about suicide. If your child says "no", trust your instincts and follow up if needed.

 **Respond:** If your child says 'Yes', stay calm and reassure them that you will help them through this.



RESPOND

How can I help my child if they tell me they are having thoughts about suicide?

No matter what your child or teen is going through, reassure them that you love them and that you will get through this together. These practical tips can help:

- Listen and acknowledge when your child or teen tells you how they are feeling. Thank them for sharing with you and validate their emotions. Avoid comments that may minimize their feelings.
- Ask your child how they want to be supported. Try not to give advice if they don't ask for it.
- Whenever you say goodbye as they leave the house for school etc, talk about the next reunion.
- Help your child to break down a problem into smaller parts, and to tackle one part at a time to make things more manageable.
- Help your child remember how they have overcome other challenges and remind them how they used their strengths to get through that difficult time. Offer hope and encouragement.
- Get professional help. You can be a great support, but you are not a therapist. If your child or teen is experiencing thoughts of suicide, they need ongoing care from a trained mental health professional.

Assure your child or teen that they are not alone.
"We're in this together. I'm going to help you get through this."

When people have overcome their feelings of suicide, there is one protective factor that stands out – a supportive relationship with at least one significant other... **That can be you!**

How can I help my child or teen to stay safe at home?

When a child or teen has thoughts of suicide (whether these thoughts are active or not) it's important to make your home a safer place. These practical tips can help:

- Remove firearms and weapons from the home, or make sure they are stored in a secure cabinet with keys held outside the home or hidden. Remove ropes, cords, sharp knives, blades or other means of obvious self-harm. Hide car keys to ensure your teen doesn't take the car without you knowing.
- Lock up and monitor all medications, including things like Acetaminophen and ASA. If your child takes prescription medication, monitor their usage closely. Dispose of any unused medication.
- Remove alcohol from the home as alcohol can impair judgement and increase risk behavior.
- Make sure your teen has developed a safety plan with their mental health care provider. The ["Be Safe" app](#) allows users to create a digital safety plan. An ongoing coping plan can also be helpful. See the **My Coping Plan** worksheet at the end of this document.
- Be mindful of 'triggers' and high risk periods, and check in often during these times. Do not leave your child or teen alone for long periods. If you have to go out, take your child or teen with you.



RESPOND – In a Mental Health Emergency

WHEN URGENT ACTION IS NEEDED

If you are worried your child is in immediate danger for suicide, get professional help right away.

- Don't leave your child or teen alone. Make sure that there is someone with your child at all times, whether it is you or a close friend or family member.
- Call a telephone distress line for your area or **Canada Suicide Prevention Service** (1-833-456-4566).
- If your child or teen says they cannot stop thinking about suicide and has imminent plans to hurt themselves, call 911 or go to your local hospital emergency room immediately.

If you discover your child or teen after a suicide attempt, call 911 right away.

- Give first aid if you can. Follow the guidance of the 911 operator.
- Contact someone to go with you to the hospital or to stay with you at home.
- Talk to your child, reassure them, let them know you are there with them.

Suicide thoughts and actions are mental health emergencies.
(e.g., having a plan to kill oneself or an active suicide attempt)

Call 911 or go to your local hospital emergency room immediately.

There are people ready and available to help.

Note: If you visit an emergency room, be prepared that you may be asked to participate in screening for COVID-19, wear a mask, etc. Try to stay calm and see this as an example of how caring professionals are providing support. For an excellent overview on preparing for a mental health emergency, consult the CHEO resource [Helping Children and Youth with Suicidal Thoughts](#).

Mental health emergencies, and particularly those involving suicidal behavior, can leave caregivers with a range of overwhelming emotions. Get support for yourself. Once you have secured professional help for your child or teen, contact a close family member or friend to support you during this crisis. Think about getting professional counseling support for yourself as well. You can contact [ConnexOntario](#) to learn more about services in your area (1-866-531-2600).

To access free, mental health treatment in your area for children, youth and families, including walk-in clinics (virtual & in-person), ongoing counseling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment contact [Children's Mental Health Ontario](#). No referral necessary.

Children and youth can speak with a counsellor 24/7 by calling Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or texting CONNECT to 686868.



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

How can I support my child or teen following a death by suicide?

Unfortunately, your child or teen may experience the death of a friend, classmate, or relative by suicide. This may enhance risk for those who are already having suicidal thoughts, but is of course upsetting for all who are impacted by this tragic loss. You can help your child through this. It is important to talk about what happened, and to make sure your child is okay. These practical tips can help:

- Ask about the impact of the death on them. Find out what they know and provide as much factual information as you can if they have questions or misinterpretations.
- Listen and validate how they feel, letting them know it is normal to have many different feelings (e.g., “You seem both angry and sad that your friend died by suicide. That is hard but a really natural response to something so sudden and tragic.”). No matter what your child says, try to react calmly.
- Let your child know that you are thinking about their well-being, too (e.g., “Given all you are dealing with right now, I wonder if you have thoughts of suicide. You can tell me and we can talk.”)
- As your child grieves, walk alongside (e.g., “I can see you’re in a lot of pain. I’m sorry. Let’s think of what we can do to figure this out. I want to be helpful and I’m here for you no matter what.”)
- If your child seems to need more help in processing what has happened, ask about who their ‘go-to’ sources of support are at school and in the community. List trusted adults they could go to for help if you aren’t there. Inform them about 24/7 community supports such as [Kids Help Phone](https://www.kidshelpphone.ca) (1-800-668-6868 or text “CONNECT” to 686868).

- Discuss self-care and coping. Ask your child/teen what they do for self-care, or to cope when they’re feeling stressed. Model and discuss your own self-care and personal resiliency strategies.
- Keep the lines of communication open. You could say, “I want you to know that I am always here for you if you want to talk. I promise to listen with an open mind and heart. Is there anything I can do to make myself more available to you?”

How can I work together with my child’s school to keep my child mentally well?

Your child’s school is a partner in supporting student mental health. Specific resources have been created to support educators to ensure a mentally healthy welcome and ongoing caring environment for learning. If you’re concerned about your child’s mental health, or if they are having suicidal thoughts, you can speak to their teacher(s) to ensure coordinated support. These practical tips can help:

- Be specific about your concerns so you and the teacher can figure out the best way to help. Share any information you think may be helpful to the teacher (e.g., approaches that seem to help, specific behaviours you’re noticing).
- Ask the teacher what they’ve noticed at school. Some children may seem fine or show different signs at school. Discuss what you and they are seeing so you each have the full picture.
- Ask about options for ongoing communication so you can share new information with the school.

Working as a team, you can help to ensure the wellness and safety of your child at school.



My Coping Plan

When we are feeling distressed and overwhelmed it can be hard to think straight, or know what to do in the moment. This worksheet is meant to help you problem solve how to cope with difficult situations ahead of time.

Everyone has their own way of coping so it is important that you try what you think might work for you. Remember, it is likely to take some time, and involve trying different ideas, before you find the exact plan that works for you. Don't give up!

The goal of my coping plan is to:

(e.g., attend school more often, reduce conflict with friends, not need to visit the hospital etc.)

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What does distress look like for me? What are my warning signs?

(e.g., acting irritable and grumpy, trouble catching my breath, trouble concentrating, feeling on edge, sleeping/ eating too much or too little etc.)

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PREPARE; PREVENT; RESPOND:

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**What healthy activities can calm and comfort me during times of distress?
(e.g., watch a movie/listen to music, talk to a parent/friend, write in my journal, go for a walk, play with a pet etc.)**

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What specific skills can I learn and practice to lower my distress?

> Deep breathing/box breathing

> Muscle tense and release

> Visualization/mental vacation

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What healthy habits will help me to prevent distress?

(consider your sleep and exercise routines as well as your eating habits. How can you incorporate these into your schedule?)

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PREPARE; PREVENT; RESPOND:

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What have I done in the past that was helpful when I was feeling distressed? (e.g., talked with a parent, called a help line etc.)
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When I need help, I can contact the following people for support: (consider adults in your life who will listen – e.g., a parent, teacher, guidance counsellor, or coach)
Who:
When:
How:
Who:
When:
How:
Who:
When:
How:

Supportive community resources

Kids Help Phone
24 hrs, 7 days per week

kidshelpphone.ca

1-800-668-6868

or text "CONNECT" to 686868

**COVID-19 Youth Mental Health
Resource Hub**

Jack.org/Covid

LOCAL CRISIS LINE/SERVICE



School
Mental Health
Ontario

Santé mentale
en milieu scolaire
Ontario

www.smho-smso.ca