

Suicide Prevention

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among school age youth. However, suicide is preventable. Youth who are contemplating suicide frequently give warning signs of their distress. Parents, teachers, and friends are in a key position to pick up on these signs and get help. Most important is to never take these warning signs lightly or promise to keep them secret. When all adults and students in the school community are committed to making suicide prevention a priority and are empowered to take the correct actions-we can help youth before they engage in behavior with irreversible consequences.

Suicide Risk Factors:

Although far from perfect predictors, certain characteristics are associated with increased odd of having suicidal thoughts. These include:

- Mental illness including depression, conduct disorders, and substance abuse.
- Family stress/dysfunction.
- Environmental risks, including presence of a firearm in the home.
- Situational crises (e.g., traumatic death of a loved one, physical or sexual abuse, family violence).

Suicide Warning Signs:

Most suicidal youth demonstrate observable behaviors that signal their suicidal thinking. These include:

- Suicidal threats in the form of direct ("I am going to kill myself") and indirect ("I wish I could fall asleep and never wake up again") statements.
- Suicide notes and plans (including online postings).
- Prior suicidal behavior. Making final arrangements (e.g., making funeral arrangements, writing a will, giving away prized possessions).
- Preoccupation with death. Changes in behavior, appearance, thoughts and/or feelings.

What to Do:

Youth who feel suicidal are not likely to seek help directly; however, parents, school personnel, and peers can recognize the warning signs and take immediate action to keep the youth safe. When a youth gives signs that they may be considering suicide, the following actions should be taken:

- Remain calm.
- Ask the youth directly if he or she is thinking about suicide (e.g., "Are you thinking of suicide?").
- Focus on your concern for their well-being and avoid being accusatory.
- Listen & Do not judge.
- Reassure them that there is help and they will not feel like this forever.
- Provide constant supervision.
- Do not leave the youth alone.
- Remove means for self-harm.
- **Get help:** No one should ever agree to keep a youth's suicidal thoughts a secret and instead should tell an appropriate caregiving adult, such as a parent, teacher, or school psychologist. Parents should seek help from school or community mental health resources as soon as possible. School staff should take the student to a school-employed mental health professional or administrator.

The Role of the School in Suicide Prevention:

Children and adolescents spend a substantial part of their day in school under the supervision of school personnel. Effective suicide and violence prevention is integrated with supportive mental health services, engages the entire school community, and is imbedded in a positive school climate through student behavioral expectations and a caring and trusting student/adult relationship. Therefore, it is crucial for all school staff members to be familiar with, and watchful for, risk factors and warning signs of suicidal behavior. The entire school staff should work to create an environment where students feel safe sharing such information. School psychologists and other crisis response team personnel, including the school counselor and school administrator, are trained to intervene when a student is identified at risk for suicide. These individuals conduct suicide risk assessment, warn/inform parents, provide recommendations and referrals to community services, and often provide follow up counseling and support at school.

Parental Notification and Participation:

When a situation calls for a suicide risk assessment to be conducted, parents will be notified. Parents also contribute to a suicide risk assessment as they often have information critical to making an appropriate assessment of risk, including mental health history, family dynamics, recent traumatic events, and previous suicidal behaviors. The suicide risk assessment could result in the transport of a student to mental health for further assessment. If this occurs, the parent will be asked to provide the school discharge documentation from that location and/or participate in a re-entry meeting before the student returns to campus. After a school notifies a parent of their child's risk for suicide and provides referral information, the responsibility falls upon the parent to seek mental health assistance for their child. Parents must:

- *Continue to take threats seriously:* Follow through is important even after the child calms down or informs the parent "they didn't mean it." Avoid assuming behavior is simply attention seeking.
- *Access school supports:* If parents are uncomfortable with following through on referrals, they can give the school psychologist permission to contact the referral agency, provide referral information, and follow up on the visit.
- *Maintain communication with the school:* After such an intervention, the school will also provide follow-up supports. Your communication will be crucial to ensuring that the school is the safest, most comfortable place for your child.

Resiliency Factors:

The presence of resiliency factors can lessen the potential of risk factors to lead to suicidal ideation and behaviors. Once a child or adolescent is considered at risk, schools, families, and friends should work to build these factors in and around the youth. These include:

- Family support and cohesion, including good communication.
- Peer support and close social networks.
- School and community connectedness.
- Cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide and promote healthy living.
- Adaptive coping and problem-solving skills, including conflict-resolution.
- General life satisfaction, good self-esteem, sense of purpose.
- Easy access to effective medical and mental health resources.

The following are a list of school and community resources to assist families in accessing mental health supports for their child/children:

Atwater Elementary District Mental Health Contacts		
School Psychologist	Telephone Number	School Site
Miriam Andrade	(209) 357-6517	Peggy Heller
	(209) 357-6136	Aileen Colburn
Kendall Callister	(209) 357-6124	Mitchell Senior
Krushenka Salazar		
Martha Morales	(209) 357-6140	Bellevue
Ms. Del Toro	(209) 357-6145	Shaffer
	(209) 357-6148	Thomas Olaeta
Karina Flores	(209) 358-3741	Preschool
Cristina Rubalcava	(209) 357-6143	Elmer Wood
	(209) 357-6112	Mitchell K6

National & County Resources	
National Suicide Prevention Hotline	1-800-273-8255
Crisis Text Line	Text HOME to 741741 in the United States
Merced County Mental Health Services	(209) 381-6879
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)	(209) 381-6844
Nine-Line Crisis Counseling (24-Hour) Nationwide Crisis/Suicide Hotline for Runaways, Homeless Youth, and their Families, Short-Term Phone Counseling	(800) 999-9999
Peer to Peer Crisis Teen Line	(800) 852-8336
Sierra Vista Child & Family Services	(209) 205-1058
Marie Green Inpatient Psychiatric Center	(209) 381-6879