HELPING SUICIDAL CHILDREN

Valuable insights on the issue of suicide in elementary-age children

Almost all the research that's been done on suicidal youth is done with teens. Yet we know that latency-age children can have suicidal feelings and some actually kill themselves. Oftentimes, the recommendations for teens are not completely appropriate for children. We know there are high-risk parental behaviors and situations that contribute to suicidal thinking and attempts in this age group. These include high marital conflict, mentally ill parents, alcohol or drug abuse, child abuse and the death of a parent. Below are some things to keep in mind about children:

1. When a child expresses wanting to die, this is a call for help. We must take this seriously. Don’t make the mistake of thinking, She is just saying that for attention. The child NEEDS attention. Her life depends upon it!

   “They are clever enough at doing wrong, but they have no idea how to do right” (Jeremiah 4:22 NLT). From the standpoint of attention, these children need Christ’s love. You may literally be the only Jesus they see.

2. Empathize with the child’s feelings. “You must really feel bad right now” is much more helpful than “You shouldn’t say such things” or “You’ll go straight to hell if you do that.”

   “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love” (Hebrews 10:24).

3. Really listen to the child. Ask, “How would you kill yourself?” Don’t be afraid to ask if the child is expressing suicidal feelings. If the child’s plans are vague, there is less chance of the child being an imminent threat to himself. If the child is specific with his plans, he has obviously thought about this and his chances of attempting suicide are much higher.

   You may be worried that you don’t know the right thing to say in situations like this. As you are talking with the child, take a minute to claim this promise from the Lord and be confident He will supply the words: “The Lord will guide you always … You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail” (Isaiah 58:11).

4. It is important to explain to the child that God gives us life, and only He has a right to take it away. You can let the child know that suicide is considered wrong in every religion in the world. Ask the child why she thinks this is. Discuss how suicide is very hurtful for the remaining family and friends, and we need to use feelings of wanting to die as a warning to ourselves to seek other ways to help ourselves.

   “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). As you talk to the child, explain through this Scripture that God made us and it is because of how He made us that we can continue to live on this earth and even begin to praise Him for who we are.

HELPING A SUICIDAL CHILD

Divorce and death can devastate children. If your child says, or gives you signs, that he’s considering suicide, here are three things you should do:

- Stay calm
- Get help
- Remove means to attempt suicide

Further insights on helping a suicidal child are available on Single & Parenting’s Session 2 video seminar. Find a group near you at www.singleandparenting.org/findagroup.
5. There are children who see how upset parents get when the children say “I want to die,” and the children begin to say it to get their way. It’s important to say, “You are really angry right now.” Don’t forget the power of empathy. This requires a judgment call. If the child is generally happy and only says he wants to die when a parent says “NO” then the parent needs to stay calm and NOT overreact to the comments. Be matter of fact: “I know you’re mad about __. Let’s talk about it.” If the child is too upset to talk then, discuss it later when everyone has calmed down.

“Don’t be too eager to tell others their faults, for we all make many mistakes” (James 3:1 LB). It may be difficult to stay calm and reassuring during a time like this. But remember this Scripture and put yourself in the child’s place.

6. Do not allow children this age to watch scary, dark movies or read books with dark and evil death-related themes. What kinds of video games is the child playing? These movies/videos/books just add fuel to suicidal feelings. Encourage the watching and reading of uplifting stories.

“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds ... Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 11:18–19). God knows children are impressionable. That’s why He tells us to impress the children with His words, not man-created angry and dark games, movies and stories.

7. Ask the child to find good things about her day. Encourage her to pay attention to little things that are nice. It is easy for depressed children and adults to focus only on the bad things. We have to discipline ourselves to develop the “attitude of gratitude.”

“The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17). Find the talents the Lord has given this child. Explain how the Lord can enjoy the child and how happy He is over her. Help the child imagine the Lord rejoicing and singing over her right now. Wow, that is a beautiful picture for all of us. This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!

8. Encourage the child to come up with alternatives to killing himself. What are the other choices for handling this problem? Seeing a counselor/psychologist. Talking to a family member or friend. Drawing or writing to express feelings in a journal. It has been said that suicide is a permanent solution to an often-temporary problem.

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me ... Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:10, 12). You can explain to the child that many people in the book of Psalms became discouraged. They sought other ways to be encouraged by asking God to provide for them.

9. Children who are depressed need plenty of physical activity. Get the child moving! Make it a family affair! We know that kids who spend much of their free time playing video games or watching TV are much more likely to suffer from depression and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

“They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion ... They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more” (Jeremiah 31:12).

10. For a young child who truly wants to die and is depressed, remove all means to accomplish this: ropes, firearms, knives, razor blades, pills, etc. Consult the child’s primary care physician for a referral to a child psychiatrist/psychologist/therapist/hospital, etc., to evaluate the level of suicidality. This needs to be a person highly skilled in working with this age child. There are a few hospitals that will take elementary-age children, and if a child is a danger to herself or others, then that may be the safest place for her.

11. The National Suicide Hotline is 1-800-273-TALK. While teens or adults might call, elementary-age children would be unlikely to. However, if a parent has a child threatening suicide, a parent can call for advice.

“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26). As you discover a child is suicidal in that particular moment in time, you may be the only one to step forward to
help save this child. We have given you things to say and ways to handle this situation. Above all keep in mind what Jesus instructed us to do, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there” (Matthew 19:14–15).

**SUICIDE MYTHS**

*If a person talks about it, he or she won’t do it*  
**Truth:** Most people who attempt or succeed have talked about it

*A person is threatening just to get attention*  
**Truth:** The person may need attention; you must act!

*Kids don’t commit suicide*  
**Truth:** Even children as young as five or six have killed themselves

*Teens are most likely*  
**Truth:** The elderly are the most likely; however, children and teen suicide rates are rising

*A person on anti-depressants is more likely to commit suicide*  
**Truth:** Depression left untreated is at the highest risk

*A suicidal person always gives clues if others are just paying attention*  
**Truth:** Not everybody broadcasts intent or shows signs

*A promise to keep a note unopened and unread should always be kept*  
**Truth:** This is a HIGH indicator for suicidal intent

*A promise to keep suicidal intent secret should be kept*  
**Truth:** This is one promise that should NEVER be kept

*If I tell, the person will be mad at me*  
**Truth:** The person is often grateful later

*A person who survives a previous attempt is not likely to re-attempt*  
**Truth:** A previous attempt is an indicator of future attempts

*There is no way to stop a person intent on suicide*  
**Truth:** There are many things than can be done to stop a person, but all suicides cannot be prevented

*The only effective help is from a professional*  
**Truth:** Friends, relatives, teachers, ministers, neighbors and coworkers can all be helpful

*More suicides occur during the winter*  
**Truth:** True for adults, not for children and teens

*Talking about suicide encourages attempts*  
**Truth:** Talking about it can prevent more than it can hurt

*Depression and self-destructive behavior are rare in young people*  
**Truth:** These are common in adolescents

*Suicide is painless*  
**Truth:** Attempts can be painful and if unsuccessful, can lead to lifelong disabilities
RED FLAGS FOR SUICIDE

- A drastic change in behavior
- Uninterested in personal appearance
- Withdraws from friends and/or social activities
- Loses interest in hobbies, work, school, etc.
- Gives away prized possessions
- Has attempted suicide before
- Takes unnecessary risks
- Has experienced loss through death, divorce, breakup of friendship, etc.
- Eating or sleeping habits have changed
- Child is acting out in an unusual and severe manner
- Destructive behavior such as running into traffic, jumping from heights, scratching or mutilating oneself
- Discussing killing oneself in a joking manner
- Suicidal themes in artwork, schoolwork or drawings
- Is in trouble frequently with parents and school
- Loss of self-esteem
- Lack of support system to deal with problems
- Talks about death and dying
- Parental abuse of drugs and/or alcohol

By Barbara W. Wright, LPC, CCPS, and Linda Ranson Jacobs

Barbara W. Wright
Licensed Professional Counselor,
Certified Child Development and
Parenting Specialist
Norman Behavioral Health Group, Norman, OK
Bwright@normanbhg.com

Linda Ranson Jacobs
Creator of DivorceCare for Kids, www.dc4k.org
Founder of Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids,

Disclaimer: The information presented in this article is for general information and should not be considered specific advice for any potential suicide situation. Always involve a church leader and/or mental health professional in the event you encounter a person or child whom you believe might be considering suicide. Remember, you are not a mental health professional and should not attempt to diagnose or treat a person who is considering or discussing suicide. Get help quickly!