

Suicide in schools: Information for parents



headspace
School Support

You will have been made aware that a suicide has occurred at your child's school.

This is a very sad and traumatic event for all students, school staff, parents and the wider school community. Below is some information that may be helpful in assisting you and your child to manage during this difficult time.

Young people respond to suicide in unique ways, and a wide range of reactions is possible

Your child's response will be influenced by their personality, their relationship with the deceased person, what is happening in their life and their ability to adjust to change.

Whatever age your child is they will need to find safe ways of expressing their feelings. They may feel:

- confusion
- anger
- aggression
- withdrawal
- fear
- guilt
- denial
- blame
- betrayal
- abandonment
- hurt
- sadness.

Parental understanding, reassurance and attention are very important at this time. Be guided by your child's need to talk, and make it clear to them that you will be available whenever they need you.

Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives may find it harder to cope

These experiences may include the separation/divorce of parents, the death of a relative/pet and moving house/school. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even if they had appeared to be coping. If your child is already using the services of a psychologist or psychiatrist, make them aware of the suicide.

Your child may have a lot of questions

They may want to know exactly what happened. The school will have provided your child with information about the incident. Details about the way a suicide occurred will not be given to students, as this information is potentially harmful to their wellbeing. As parents, it is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help-seeking" actions which young people can take. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent, counsellor, teacher, relative or friend.

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“Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend”

This is an important message to share with your child, in any discussion about suicide. Adolescents sometimes share their feelings about death with friends – in conversations, letters, emails, text messages and on the internet. If they suspect a friend may be about to hurt themselves, they should tell an adult immediately.

Be aware that you or your child may be affected by the media’s responses to the event

You may decide to protect your family against certain coverage. You may choose to watch the news together, so you can discuss any concerns that are raised and ensure your child feels supported. Hopefully, media reporting of specific youth suicides will not occur. However, if it does, be aware that it can contribute to young people’s vulnerability.

Some reactions can happen weeks, months or a year after an event

If you are concerned about your child’s reaction and behaviour (such as changes in their socialising or school work), it is important to speak to the principal or student counsellor at their school or a GP. This may result in a referral to a counsellor for a mental health and/or risk assessment.

Be aware that school staff will also be affected

While everyone will be working towards normalising school routines, some staff will be managing difficult emotions. Through the Department of Education and other relevant bodies adult counselling support is available to all school staff through a process outside the school.

Respond to community concern with respect

When you speak with other members of the community, reinforce that the best approach is to:

- Respect the bereaved/affected family;
- Avoid glamourising/sensationalising suicide; and
- Encourage help-seeking actions in young people.

Young people should also encourage help-seeking in any friends they have concerns about.

Where can parents and young people get more information and help?

headspace centres provide support, information and advice to young people aged 12 to 25. For locations and other information, go to headspace.org.au

headspace School Support is a service which supports schools following a suicide. More information is available on the **headspace** School Support website headspace.org.au/schoolsupport

eheadspace provides online counselling and telephone support to young people aged 12 to 25. Its services are available at eheadspace.org.au and on **1800 650 890**

Other resources

beyondblue’s youth program, Youthbeyondblue, promotes the message that it’s acceptable to talk about depression. It encourages young people, their families and friends to look out for each other and to get help when it is needed. A set of youth fact sheets can be downloaded from youthbeyondblue.com

Reach Out! is a web based service that encourages young people to help themselves through tough times. The service aims to improve young people’s mental health and wellbeing by providing support, information and referrals in a format designed for young people. You can find them at au.reachout.com

Kids Helpline is a 24-hour telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25. They be contacted on **1800 55 1800** and at kidshelpline.com.au.

Lifeline (**13 11 14**) is a 24-hour telephone counselling service. lifeline.org.au has other online information and referral services.

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