

what you

# NEED TO KNOW

about...

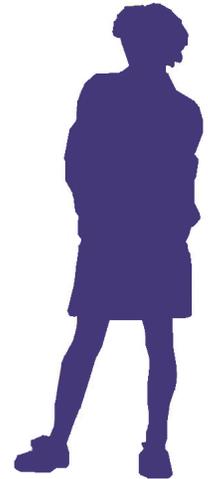
## Helping Children and Youth who are feeling suicidal Information for Parents and Caregivers

### What is suicide?

Suicide is the act of ending one's life. Children and youth can have thoughts of suicide for many reasons, especially when they experience so much stress that they feel overwhelmed and cannot cope.

#### Typical stresses include:

- Being disconnected, or having conflict with people (parents, brothers, sisters, friends, co-workers, employers)
- School: problems with schoolwork, peers, bullying, peer pressure, teachers
- Family stresses: parent's separation, divorce or mental health problems; problems getting along with parents, siblings
- Mental health problems like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, or addictions
- Having to keep secrets from others. Youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered may feel pressured to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity from others, causing immense stress. This is usually out of fear, because they worry about being rejected should they be 'outed'. Other secrets include sexual abuse, which children and youth often hide from parents.



#### Children and youth can feel suicidal when they feel:

- Disconnected from others
- Helpless to deal with their stress
- Hopeless that their stress or situation will not improve.

#### No matter what stress youth are feeling, you can help youth who are feeling suicidal by helping them to:

- Feel more connected with others again
- Gain a sense of control over their lives (to overcome helplessness)
- See that things will get better (hope!)

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...

### Be that person who matters!

### What are some warning signs for suicide?

#### Children and youth may be thinking about suicide if they:

- Talk about suicide and about what it would be like if they were gone. For example, they may say things like, "When I'm gone ..." or ask questions like, "What would it be like if I wasn't around?"
- Express feelings of worthlessness, for example, "I'm no good to anybody."
- Seem hopeless about the future, saying things like, "What's the use?"
- Become pre-occupied with giving away their belongings



# What should we do if we think our child or teen is having thoughts of suicide?

It is not easy to talk about suicide. You may be worried about ‘planting’ ideas of suicide in your child’s mind. But don’t be afraid to ask about suicide. Studies show that you cannot ‘plant’ ideas of suicide in someone’s head. Hopefully your child will never feel this way, but if she does, the fact that you have raised the topic will make it easier for your child to confide in you...

**Talk about it.** Start gently, by first asking how your child or teen is feeling.

Start slowly, by asking some general questions...

“How are you doing?”

**Listen.** It’s important to give your child or teen a chance to respond to your first question.

“I love you and I’m worried about you.”

“It seems like things have been stressful for you lately”.

“Does it ever get so stressful that you think life isn’t worth living?.”

“Do you get any thoughts of doing something to end your life?”

Express your concerns ⇨

Remark on what you’re noticing ⇨

Bring up suicide ⇨

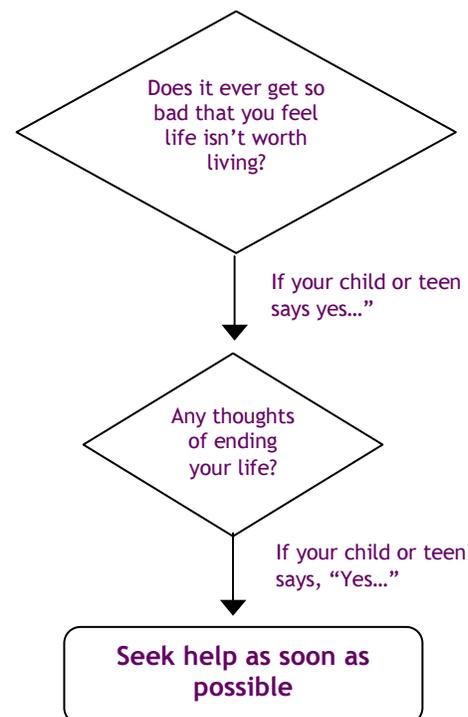
Ask more if needed.

## My child says that he is feeling suicidal, and has plans to end his life.

If your child is expressing that she cannot stop thinking about suicide and has imminent plans to hurt herself, seek professional help right away:

- **Don’t leave your child alone:** make sure that there is someone with your child, whether it is you or a close friend or family member.
- **Call for professional help in a crisis:** call 911 or a telephone crisis line. Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775
- **Get support for yourself during this time of crisis.** If you have contacted professional help, then consider calling a close family member or friend to support you as you get help for your child.

For more information about help in your community, see the ‘Where to get help’ section at the end of this fact sheet.



**Trust your instincts.** Even if your child says “no” when you directly ask about thoughts of suicide, trust your instincts. If you are worried your child or teen is in immediate danger for suicide, then get help.

## Helping children and youth feel that life is worth living

**Strengthen your relationship with your child.** A strong parent-child relationship is the single most important factor that helps any young person with stress.

1. **“But my child doesn’t want to spend time with me! He’d rather spend time with his friends!”** Friends and peers are **very** important to teens. Although it is healthy for teens to have friends and social activities, this shouldn’t completely replace parents and family. Friends can never give the same love and support that parents can. And teens really do need this special love and support that only parents can give. The good news is that there are ways to strengthen your relationship with your child. It may not be easy at first, but it is well worth the effort. Your child **really does** need you.
2. **Spend regular time with your child, ideally one on one.** Invite your child to go on ‘dates’ with you outside of your home. Or find things you can do at home together: cooking, baking, a home project, tossing a ball around outside. Try to find at least one time every day, where you can spend quality time with your child. This gives your child the chance to share feelings or confide in you about what’s really going on. **Remember that quality time is not asking about homework, chores, or anything that your child might see as criticism.** Quality time is about creating a warm atmosphere where your child feels willing to share feelings. It’s a chance for you to validate those feelings.
3. **Listen and validate.** When your child tells you how she is feeling, thank your child or teen for sharing with you. “I didn’t know you were feeling so bad... Thanks for telling me.”
4. **Show empathy.** This means accepting how bad your child or teen is feeling. “Yeah, I can see that would be very difficult.”

### What not to say:

- “You shouldn’t be feeling this way”
- “It’s not that bad”
- “You should count yourself lucky”
- “How can you be feeling so bad when we’ve given you so much? What do you expect from us?”

These comments can make children and youth feel guilty and ashamed, and they might not open up to you any more. Blaming children and youth only makes them feel worse, and may confirm to them that they are a burden for you. This could increase the risk of suicide.

5. **Avoid jumping in with advice or criticism.** Because as parents we have more life experience than our children, we think we are being helpful when we offer advice or criticism. Even though we mean well, children and youth need to feel ‘heard’, understood and accepted. Giving advice or criticizing can seem to a child that we are not really hearing them, and really don’t understand what she is going through.
6. **Give hope.** You might say: “This is going to get better.” If things were better in the past, you might say, “I will be with you and we’ll work on this and get through it as we did before.” Help your child remember how he has overcome other challenges and remind him how he used his strengths to get through that difficult time.
7. **Assure your child or teen that she is not alone.** You might say: “We’re in this one together; we’re going to help you get over this.”
8. **Offer support, but ask your child how he wants to be supported.** Ask: “How can I support you? How can I help you with this?” Don’t give advice if your child doesn’t ask for it. Youth will ask for advice if they want



it. If you are unsure, ask: “How can I support you? Do you want me to just listen, or do you want my advice?”

- 9. Whenever you say goodbye, talk about the next reunion.** If your child is leaving for school, then you might say, “Have a great day at school! I’ll see you after school, and I look forward to our walk together!”
- 10. Help with problem-solving.** Children and youth can think about suicide when they are overwhelmed by stress. Even if those stresses don’t directly cause suicidal feelings, stress certainly doesn’t help. You can help with problem solving by saying something like:

“Sometimes people think of hurting themselves when they’re under stress or trying to deal with some problem. I’m here for you and I want to help you work through this. Is there something that is stressing you out right now?”, or

“Is there a problem you’re trying to work out?”

If your child is unsure, about what is bothering him, you might just ask about the usual stresses like school, friendships, peer pressure, bullying, relationships ( girlfriends or boyfriends), teachers or schoolwork.

- 11. Get professional help.** You can be a great support, but remember- you are not a therapist. And even if you are a trained therapist, your role is to be your child’s parent or caregiver, not a therapist. For all these reasons and more, if your child is feeling that life isn’t worth living, speak to a professional. Make sure you have the support you need too; either through your network of friends or family, or by finding a therapist. It can be extremely stressful caring for a child who is depressed or suicidal. It’s important for you to have support at this difficult time, so that you continue to have the energy to care for your child.

## Making your home safer for someone who is feeling suicidal

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:

- 1 Remove firearms and weapons**  
Make sure that there are no firearms, ammunition nor weapons in your home. Or make sure they are stored in a securely locked firearms cabinet, and keep the keys with a neighbour, your workplace, or some other place where your child cannot easily find them. In a crisis, you can also call your local police station to see if they would store them for you temporarily.
- 2 Remove alcohol**  
Alcohol is a risk factor for suicide. Alcohol affects rational thinking and can make children and youth more impulsive. Remove alcohol from your home, or only keep small amounts.
- 3 Medications**
  - Lock up all medications, even non-prescription ones (Acetaminophen or Tylenol™, acetylsalicylic acid-ASA or Aspirin™ can be very dangerous overdoses).
  - People who are depressed often overdose on their depression medications. Fortunately, many newer medications for depression (Fluoxetine/Prozac™, Fluvoxamine/Luvx™, Sertraline/Zoloft™, Paroxetine/Paxil™, Citalopram/Celexa™) are much safer than the older medications, even in overdose.
  - Ask your doctor to prescribe only safe amounts of medications. When you fill prescriptions, ask the pharmacist to dispense safe amounts. This makes it more difficult for your child or teen to overdose.
  - Supervise children and youth when they take medication.
  - Take all unused or out-of-date medications to your local pharmacy for disposal.
- 4 Remove any other means of suicide**  
Remove or lock up cords, ropes, sharp knives, or other obvious means of self-harm.
- 5**



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### Car keys

Keep car keys hidden so youth can't use your car to hurt themselves.

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### Lock up things in the car

If you don't have other ways to lock things up, you can lock firearms or medications in your car (the trunk is best).

## High Risk Periods

During high risk periods (like holidays, anniversaries, or times when close supports are away), be extra careful and:

- Check in often with your child or teen.
- Do not leave your child or teen alone for long periods. If you have to go out, take your youth with you. If you absolutely cannot get your youth to come along, then have someone stay with your child

## Emergency Action Plan

A crisis is not the time to be running around searching for phone numbers. Make an emergency action plan ahead of time. It will be easier knowing exactly what to do and how to get help in an emergency.

	Name(s) / Phone Number
People I can call day or night for support	
Health care professionals (Doctors or other therapists)	
Hospital (the one your child or teen uses)	
Helpful people that my child trusts in the event of an emergency (These would be <i>helpful</i> people that could support, or give advice to your child)	
Emergency child care (in case you have to leave other children at home to go with your child to the hospital)	
Name of Power of Attorney (if applicable) (consider a power of attorney if your child is aged 16 and above)	
Pharmacy (where you get medications from)	
<b>Medications</b> (including dosages)	

## If you're going to the hospital

There are some important things to know when you bring your child or teen to the hospital (because of suicidal or violent episodes):

- It's best if you can get your child or teen to agree to go the hospital voluntarily.

- If you can't get your child or teen to agree to go to the hospital, ask someone your child or teen trusts to try to convince her (include this person's name and number in your emergency action plan).
- Try to offer a choice, like "Will you go to the hospital with me, or would you prefer to go with (other trusted relative or friend)?" This helps children and teens feel like they are part of the plan, and not so helpless.
- At the emergency department, if youth are old enough (generally 16 and older), they may ask to speak with the health professionals without parents being there, as they may want to discuss some feelings privately. If this happens, you can still ask to speak directly with the professionals looking after your child afterward. Ask about the plan, and what you can do to help support your child.

#### **What if the hospital discharges my child or teen, but I think she should be admitted?**

Tell your child's doctor that you feel unsafe taking your child home, and explain why. Remember that mental health professionals in an emergency room deal with mental health crises often, so they may have a higher tolerance for mental health distress than you. But you can still ask them to explain why they feel that it is safe for your child to go home. Also ask for advice on how best to keep your child safe at home.

### **If your child is at immediate risk for suicide, or you are afraid for your child's immediate safety:**

- Call 911 for emergency services
- Call the Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario at 613-260-2360 (Ottawa) or 1-877-377-7775 (toll-free)
- For children and youth up to age 18, you can take your child to the Emergency Department at CHEO
- For youth aged 16 and older, you can take them to any hospital

### **If you discover your child or teen after a suicide attempt:**

- Call 911 (or an ambulance) right away.
- Give first aid if you've been trained.
- Phone someone to go with you to the hospital; or to stay with you at home.
- After you come home from the hospital, do not try to handle things alone. Make sure you have relatives or friends to talk to. Think about contacting a support group, counselor or therapist for yourself as well.

## Where to find help in Eastern Ontario

**In a crisis?** Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775

- Looking for mental health help?** [www.eMentalHealth.ca](http://www.eMentalHealth.ca) is a bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.
- Renfrew County:** Phoenix Centre for Children, Youth and Families, with offices in Renfrew and Pembroke. 613-735-2374 or toll-free 1-800-465-1870, [www.renc.igs.net/~phoenix](http://www.renc.igs.net/~phoenix)
- Leeds and Grenville County:** Child and Youth Wellness Centre, with offices in Brockville, Elgin, Gananoque and Prescott. 613-498-4844, [www.cywc.net](http://www.cywc.net)
- Lanark County:** Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth, with offices in Carleton Place, Smiths Falls and Perth. 613-283-8260, [www.opendoors.on.ca](http://www.opendoors.on.ca)
- To find a Psychologist anywhere in Ontario:** College of Psychologists of Ontario, 1-800-489-8388, [www.cpo.on.ca](http://www.cpo.on.ca)
- Kids Help Phone / Jeunesse, J'écoute** 1-800-668-6868. Web: [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca).  
A toll-free, 24/7, bilingual phone number for children and youth anywhere in Canada. Professional counselors support the caller over the phone (or internet) and can help connect the caller to local community resources. Tel: 1-800-668-6868. Web: [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca).

## Where to find help in Ottawa

- Youth Services Bureau**, for ages 12-20, 613-562-3004
- Family Service Centre of Ottawa**, 613-725-3601, [www.familyservicesottawa.org](http://www.familyservicesottawa.org)
- Catholic Family Services**, 613-233-8418, [www.cfssc-ottawa.org](http://www.cfssc-ottawa.org)
- Jewish Family Services**, 613-722-2225, [www.jfsottawa.com](http://www.jfsottawa.com)
- The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre** (by physician's referral), 613-737-7600 ext. 2496. For more information on our programs, [www.cheo.on.ca](http://www.cheo.on.ca)
- To find a Psychologist in Ottawa:** Call the Ottawa Academy of Psychology referral service, 613-235-2529. Lists many, but not all, Ottawa psychologists. [www.ottawa-psychologists.org/find.htm](http://www.ottawa-psychologists.org/find.htm)

## Support and Advocacy Groups

- Bereaved Families of Ottawa.** For those struggling with a loved one who has completed suicide, BFO offers various supports for survivors.
- PLEO (Parent's Lifelines of Eastern Ontario)**, a support group for parents of children and youth with mental health difficulties, [www.pleo.on.ca](http://www.pleo.on.ca)
- Parents for Children's Mental Health**, a province-wide organization for parents supporting children and youth with mental health issues, [www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org](http://www.parentsforchildrensmentalhealth.org)

## Websites

- Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, [www.cheo.on.ca](http://www.cheo.on.ca), growing information section on mental health and health
- Centre for Suicide Prevention, <http://www.suicideinfo.ca>
- Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, <http://www.suicideprevention.ca/>

**Authors:** Reviewed by the Mental Health Information Committee at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and by members of the Child and Youth Mental Health Information Network ([www.cymhin.ca](http://www.cymhin.ca)).

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**Disclaimer:** Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Provided by:

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