

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 10

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TEEN SUICIDE

Suicides among young people continue to be a serious problem. Each year in the U.S., thousands of teenagers commit suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15-to-24-year-olds, and the sixth leading cause of death for 5-to-14-year-olds.

Teenagers experience strong feelings of stress, confusion, self-doubt, pressure to succeed, financial uncertainty, and other fears while growing up. For some teenagers, divorce, the formation of a new family with step-parents and step-siblings, or moving to a new community can be very unsettling and can intensify self-doubts. For some teens, suicide may appear to be a solution to their problems and stress.

Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable mental disorders. The child or adolescent needs to have his or her illness recognized and diagnosed, and appropriate treatment plans developed. When parents are in doubt whether their child has a serious problem, a psychiatric examination can be very helpful.

Many of the symptoms of suicidal feelings are similar to those of depression.

Parents should be aware of the following signs of adolescents who may try to kill themselves:

- change in eating and sleeping habits
- withdrawal from friends, family, and regular activities
- violent actions, rebellious behavior, or running away
- drug and alcohol use
- unusual neglect of personal appearance
- marked personality change
- persistent boredom, difficulty concentrating, or a decline in the quality of schoolwork
- frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- not tolerating praise or rewards

A teenager who is planning to commit suicide may also:

- complain of being a bad person or feeling rotten inside
- give verbal hints with statements such as: I won't be a problem for you much longer, Nothing matters, It's no use, and I won't see you again
- put his or her affairs in order, for example, give away favorite possessions, clean his or her room, throw away important belongings, etc.
- become suddenly cheerful after a period of depression
- have signs of psychosis (hallucinations or bizarre thoughts)

If a child or adolescent says, I want to kill myself, or I'm going to commit suicide, always take the statement seriously and immediately seek assistance from a qualified mental health professional. People often feel uncomfortable talking about death. However, asking the child or adolescent whether he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide can be helpful. Rather than putting thoughts in the child's head, such a question will provide assurance that somebody cares and will give the young person the chance to talk about problems.

If one or more of these signs occurs, parents need to talk to their child about their concerns and seek professional help when the concerns persist. With support from family and professional treatment, children and teenagers who are suicidal can heal and return to a more healthy path of development.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#3 Teens: Alcohol and Other Drugs

#4 The Depressed Child

#37 Children and Firearms

#38 Bipolar Disorder in Children in Teens

See Also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 7,150 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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