

## Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



### Fact Sheet

# If Only ... Detecting the Early Warning Signs for Suicide in Children

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*If only I had paid attention...*

*If only I had listened...*

*If only I had taken the time to see what was  
 before my eyes...*

There are always warning signs when a child has a problem and is at risk of harming themselves. The “if only” regrets come when parents get wrapped up in work or personal matters and such warning signs go unnoticed.

## Did You Know?

According to data from the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention:

- Every 17 minutes someone dies by suicide in the United States
- Suicide claims the lives of more than 30,000 Americans each year
- In the last 40 years the suicide rate for adolescents and young adults tripled

Suicide is the nation’s eighth leading cause of death and ranks third as a cause of death among young Americans (15–24 years of age). In the United States, nearly 1 in 5 high school students have seriously considered suicide. Estimates are that as many as 400,000 teens attempt suicide each year, and about 5,200 are successful.

## Warning Signs

Ninety percent of people who kill themselves have depression or have a diagnosable drug or alcohol problem. Other risk factors include a family history of mental illness or substance abuse, family history of suicide, family violence including physical or sexual abuse, prior suicide attempts, and incarceration.

Changes in a child’s behavior and attitude are also early warning signs for suicide. These warning signs can be detected in children of all ages. According to the Ohio Coalition for Suicide Prevention, early warning signs may include:

- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Apathy about school or job interests
- Outbursts of anger, mood swings, and drastic changes in behavior
- Withdrawal from family, friends, and social activities
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Recent loss, such as the death of a loved one, break-up of a relationship, or loss of a job
- Preoccupation with death
- Giving away prized possessions
- Making final arrangements, such as wills, funeral plans, and insurance changes

- Direct and indirect statements (e.g., “I wish I were dead.”)
- Previous suicide attempts

## What to Do

Building the parent-child relationship at home, long before a serious problem evolves, is the best form of prevention. If violence to self or others is suspected, parents need to get professional help **IMMEDIATELY**. Contact a community mental health agency, private therapist or counselor, school counselor or psychologist, family physician, or suicide prevention or crisis center. **NEVER** leave a suicidal person alone.

## Helpful Resource

The Ohio Coalition for Suicide Prevention is comprised of physicians, public health advocates, faith community members, activists, and family and friends of suicide victims who are

focused on increasing awareness among the public about the threat of suicide to adolescents and young adults. For more information contact your local Mental Health Association or local crisis hot line. If you do not have these numbers, contact 1-800-Suicide (1-800-784-2433).

Resources are also available from sources listed below.

## References and Resources

American Association of Suicidology:

[www.suicidology.org/understandingsuicide.htm](http://www.suicidology.org/understandingsuicide.htm)

Mental Health Association:

[www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/81.cfm](http://www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/81.cfm)

Ohio State University Counseling and Consultation Services

Satcher, D. (2001). *The National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action*. Retrieved March 1, 2001 from [www.mentalhealth.org/suicideprevention](http://www.mentalhealth.org/suicideprevention).

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