



Dr. Ken Shore's Classroom Problem Solver

Dealing with a Suicide Threat

Teen suicide is a problem of alarming proportions. An estimated half million teenagers in the United States attempt suicide every year -- and about 5,000 succeed. Younger children also threaten or commit suicide, although their rate of suicide is significantly less than it is with adolescents. The low rate of suicide among young children does not mean they are immune to experiencing profound distress or sadness. Indeed, young children can become depressed and even suffer the despair and desperation that underlie suicidal threats, but they usually lack the cognitive skills to plan such a complex task as well as the means to carry it out.

Elementary school children sometimes make comments or behave in a way that suggests they feel like killing themselves. Even if you conclude that a student is not serious about the threat or is unable to follow through on it, the fact that he's making those comments is cause for concern and reason for follow up. Young children who talk about wanting to kill themselves are no doubt feeling pain. But for most of those children, their talk of suicide is more an effort to end their pain than it is to end their life. For many, it also is an effort to gain attention, sympathy, and support from people who are important to them.

Although suicide threats by children of elementary school age are rare, feelings of despair are not. You need to be aware of students who may be exhibiting signs of depression or suicidal thoughts. If you have a student who is exhibiting those signs, you need to take action, including alerting your principal, informing his parents and trying to obtain professional help for the student. A child who is feeling depressed or suicidal can be helped. If he does not receive help, in some cases his feelings of sadness and despair will fade with time. In other cases, however, they can build to the point that he thinks about suicide as a way of easing his pain.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Recognize the warning signs of suicide. Just as teens who are contemplating suicide might communicate their intentions in subtle ways, so too, might younger children signal their distress indirectly. Those warning signs are often their cry for help, their way of letting us know they are hurting. The following is a list of behaviors that, when considered collectively, suggest a child is feeling distress and possibly has a desire to kill himself. Keep in mind that a child who displays one or even a number of the behaviors is not necessarily suicidal. They do suggest, however, that the child might be depressed and in need of emotional support.

- an oral comment or written note indicating a desire to die
- a previous suicidal attempt
- statements of hopelessness
- compositions or artwork involving death
- increased absenteeism from school
- unexplained decline in academic performance
- dramatic personality changes
- risky or reckless behavior
- withdrawal from family, friends or activities



- giving away his favorite possessions to friends or family
- unusual neglect of his physical appearance
- frequent physical complaints such as stomachaches or headaches
- self-inflicted injuries such as cuts, scratches or burns

Monitor at-risk children closely. Children who experience significant family changes or disturbances, whether abuse, abandonment or rejection by a family member, separation, divorce, death, or financial stress learn the hard way about the fragility of life. Those children are particularly vulnerable to depression and perhaps to suicidal thoughts.

Take every threat seriously. A threat of suicide, even when made by a young child, even when said in jest, can be a desperate cry for help. We cannot take the risk of not responding to that threat. Although a comment relating to a desire to die of course might not be indicative of suicidal intentions or even distress, you or another professional need to talk with the student to find out if that is the case. Ignoring or trivializing a child's threat when he is feeling distressed will only intensify his desperation.

Respond in a caring, compassionate manner. If one of your students has communicated, orally or in writing, his desire to die, take him aside as soon as possible and talk with him. If necessary, find someone to take over your class. Ask him what he meant when he wrote or said that. Encourage him to speak about what is upsetting him by listening attentively without criticizing him or even offering advice. Respond in a sympathetic, soothing manner and help him feel that he has been understood even if his feelings seem trivial to you. If he perceives a problem as serious, then it is serious -- to him. Let him know that it is important that you let his parents know of his distress so they can help him and that you also need to inform the principal. He might be upset with you or plead with you not to tell his parents, but you have an obligation to inform them.



Click [here](#) to share your experiences with bullying or your suggestions for dealing with it on an Education World message board.

Make use of the school's resources. Do not feel that you have to shoulder this burden alone. Notify the principal of your concern. In addition, other school staff members, including the school psychologist, guidance counselor and social worker, also can talk with the student and meet with his parents. Your school might even have a suicide prevention team that can be called upon when a student is in distress. If you choose to obtain the help of another staff member, try to select a person who has a relationship with the student. Then talk with the student, letting him know that you want him to talk with someone at school who can help him. Walk with him to that person's office. Make sure to follow up with the counselor that day and discuss the arrangements for informing the parents.

Contact the parents. If one of your students is very distressed and has expressed feelings of wanting to harm himself, it is essential that you notify his parents the same day you become aware of the information. Try to have the parents come in for a meeting and consider involving the principal and any other staff members who talked with the student. Encourage the parents to obtain professional help and be ready to offer them



some recommendations. Informing the parents is not just the professional thing to do, it is also the legally prudent thing to do.

Follow up with the parents. Talk with them within a week of your conference to offer your observations of how their child is doing, to elicit their perspective, and to find out if they have been able to find professional help. If so, encourage them to have the counselor call you so you can obtain her insights and suggestions.

Be discrete in informing other school staff about the student. It is important that other staff involved with the student, "specials," for example, be informed of his emotional distress. That will encourage them to find ways to lessen his stress and bolster his confidence and sense of belonging. Be selective in whom you give this information to and only give as much information as is necessary for others to provide the necessary emotional support.

About Ken Shore

Dr. Kenneth Shore is a psychologist who has worked in various public schools for more than 25 years. He has authored six books and produced a book and video series on bullying for schools and parent organizations called [The ABCs of Bullying Prevention](#). Click to read a [complete bio](#) or to [e-mail Dr. Shore](#). For information on how to obtain his books and videos, go to his [Web site](#).



Article by Dr. Ken Shore
Education World®
Copyright © 2006 Education World

04/07/2006