

SOME THOUGHTS FOR TEACHERS ABOUT SUICIDE

You are one most likely person to whom a suicidal child may risk divulging suicidal thoughts. You don't have the same "baggage" that they might feel about a parent relationship, and they're likely as close to you as any adult outside of the family.

Our culture is not particularly helpful about dealing with suicide. Because it is a "socially unsanctioned" death, we often don't talk openly about it.

It is also frightening when children tell us they think about killing themselves. Who among us doesn't feel a bit helpless at such a time? The **most common mistake teachers make when children reveal signs or talk of suicide is to "move away" from an open discussion rather than "moving toward" the child's need to talk openly.**

Here are the most important things teachers can do to prevent suicide:

- Learn the myths, truths and warning signs of suicide
- Listen closely to both the words and the messages behind the words that children say.
- If they give *any* indication that they are thinking about hurting/killing themselves, move "into" their conversation. Openers might be:
 - "Do you really think about hurting yourself?"
 - "How often do you think those things?"
 - "It makes me sad when I hear that kids feel that way. Let me just listen."

Often when a student commits suicide, both staff and students say, "I didn't see it coming." Or, "I didn't think he meant it." There are usually many warning signs that could have been recognized, but we tend to deny, minimize or redirect kids' thoughts or conversations because we feel so helpless to know how to intervene.

Your job is :

- to know the warning signs, language and messages to watch for
- to listen and encourage the child to talk more, not less
- to gain enough of their trust that they're willing to walk with you to the counselor or principal's office so you can do the referral
- to refer them whether they are willing to come with you or not!
- don't leave them alone if you think the threat could possibly be imminent
- check back to be certain that a referral was made, if appropriate. As the teacher to whom the child revealed, *you are liable if the report is not made!*

Your job is not to:

- decide whether they are serious – let a professional who does suicide assessment make that decision
- keep it a secret to gain their trust (you're very liable for this!)
- tell any other students or teachers – only the exact line of confidentiality-guarded steps your school has laid out

Your students are lucky to have you. A well-informed and pro-active teacher saves lives! Listen to your gut. Don't let a single warning sign go by. *Engage students in conversation!*

