

A Guide for Parents

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND PREVENTING UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO FIREARMS

WHY WE'RE JOINING TOGETHER TO ADDRESS SUICIDE AND FIREARM SAFETY

Today, young people are managing complex feelings and emotions that affect both physical and mental well-being. For parents, mental health may be a difficult topic to raise with their children, but it doesn't have to be. Talking with our young people about mental health, just as we would physical health, can help protect our kids and give them the support they need, long before a crisis.

Helping families overcome any fears or challenges in talking with their kids about mental health and suicide risk is the purpose of this guide.

The need for increased understanding and care for mental health concerns continues to grow. Suicide among people ages 10–24 is increasing, and multiple studies show today's teens are dealing with higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and other mental or emotional health concerns. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic added new challenges for everyone, and the stressors on young people may be exacerbated by its impacts.

It's important that if a parent is concerned about their child's suicide risk they start a conversation and follow the steps in this guide to provide support and promote safety at home.

While it's very rare, occasionally a child or teen with suicidal thoughts may also have thoughts about hurting others, and further assessment by a mental health professional is vital if you have any concerns about self-harm or your child's thoughts of harming others.

NSSF and AFSP developed this guide to better foster discussions to help you and your family understand how to take care of and protect your mental health. We hope you find it helpful and that you'll share it with other parents so that it can be an important tool in the effort to save lives.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

As a parent, you can approach mental health care and suicide prevention in the same way you do other health and safety issues with your children. By educating yourself, you can learn what you can do in times of need to protect them. Checking in on your child's mental health and asking the right questions – in the right way – is an important starting place. At the same time, being aware of what “lethal means” (anything such as medications, firearms, sharp objects, etc.) are in your home and what you can do to prevent unauthorized access to them can be the difference between a life saved and a tragedy for families or whole communities.

With this in mind, this resource is designed to help parents:

1

IDENTIFY

the warning signs that indicate their teen may be struggling with their mental health and/or having suicidal thoughts.

2

UNDERSTAND

how to respond (vs. react) to these warning signs.

3

CREATE

a safe home environment that prevents access to lethal means.

The following pages cover the warning signs of mental distress and the appropriate responses and safety steps for addressing lethal means access, with an emphasis on secure firearm storage. This guide also includes discussion questions, offers additional resources for more information and provides quick reference tip sheets.

Importantly, any parent or young adult experiencing a crisis is urged to reach out to any of the resources located at the bottom of every page in this guide.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	<u>Understanding Adolescent Mental Health, Suicide and Risk Factors</u> Health Factors Environmental Factors Historical Factors
8	<u>Special Considerations for Parents and Teens</u> The Role of Bullying in Mental Health and Suicide Risk The Role of Social Media in Mental Health and Suicide Risk
9	<u>When and How to Take Action</u>
10	<u>Unauthorized Access to Firearms</u>
13	<u>Unauthorized Access to Other Lethal Means</u>
14	<u>Discussion Guide</u> Questions for Parents Questions for Educators Questions for Peers
15	<u>Additional Resources to Learn More About Teen Mental Health, Suicide Prevention and Firearm Safety</u>

Visit our website to access these additional resources:

[A Tip Sheet for Parents: Mental Health, Suicide Prevention and Firearm Safety](#)

[Being There for Your Friends: A Guide to Helping Prevent Suicide](#)

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH, SUICIDE AND RISK FACTORS

Just as we all have physical health, which can vary from day-to-day, we also have mental health, and it's just as important to be cared for and looked after. Mental health is not stagnant. The internal and external factors that contribute to our mental health are always in flux. However, ongoing stressors can harm mental health. Someone with mental health challenges that become exacerbated or go untreated may consider suicide or harming others.

Parents play a critical role in helping identify changes in their teen's mood or behavior, and can help support their children by having more regular conversations about mental health, and seeking help should struggles turn into a crisis. Suicide is complex and is never the result of just one stressor. Parents who understand and recognize warning signs – as early as possible – can step in to safeguard their child's mental health and seek outside help if needed.

Mental health experts also agree that one of the most effective ways to reduce suicide is preventing access to methods of harming oneself. While there are several commonly used lethal means, firearms were used in [51 percent](#) of all suicides among Americans in 2018. Understanding the warning signs and proactively preventing unauthorized access to firearms and other means by those at risk can help reduce harmful behaviors.

Suicide is complicated and tragic, but it can also be prevented – and secure firearm storage is an important part of suicide prevention. This is especially true for teens, whose access to lethal means typically comes by way of their own homes. Practicing safe firearm storage and curtailing access for at-risk individuals can make the difference in the life of a teen who is contemplating self harm.

The first step for parents concerned that their teen may be contemplating suicide or harming themselves is to examine risk factors, which fall into three areas:

1

HEALTH FACTORS

2

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

3

HISTORICAL FACTORS

It's important to know that suicide is never the result of one risk factor, but instead the convergence of several life stressors, and even then, most people do not attempt suicide.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE ►

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH, SUICIDE AND RISK FACTORS

HEALTH FACTORS

The health area encompasses physical and mental health, including:

- Depression
- Bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia and psychosis
- Aggression
- Conduct disorder
- Anxiety disorders, including PTSD
- Substance abuse
- Serious or chronic health conditions and/or pain
- Traumatic brain injury

The majority of teens who die by suicide have mental health conditions—often undiagnosed and untreated. In fact, untreated depression is responsible for more suicide deaths than any other risk factor.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Some life events that may put teens more at risk include:

- Parents' divorce
- Family transitions
- Death of a family member or close friend
- Family financial troubles
- Significant rejection

Ongoing, stressful events can also have negative impacts for all teens, but especially those who also struggle with their mental health. Examples of situations that can be a source of teen stress include:

- Difficulties in peer relationships
- Ongoing family problems or problems in primary support network
- Ongoing academic stressors
- Relationship problems

Access to lethal means (firearms, drugs, etc.) can also be considered an environmental factor. For families concerned their teen may be at risk, one of the most important steps they can take is to closely evaluate (or re-evaluate) the availability and accessibility of lethal means in their home, and what steps they can take to reduce or prevent that access.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE ►

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH, SUICIDE AND RISK FACTORS

HISTORICAL FACTORS

When assessing risk, parents should also weigh prior experiences or associations with suicide or other trauma, such as:

- Previous suicide or self-harm attempts
- History of childhood abuse, neglect or trauma
- Family history of suicide or exposure to another person's suicide

Overlaying with risk factors are warning signs to watch for – things that should alert you that your teen may be suffering from depression, a mental health issue or even having thoughts of suicide. Watch for changes in your child's behavior, and reach out and talk with your child should you notice any of these signs:

- Talks about killing themselves, feeling hopeless or having no reason to live.
- Expresses being a burden to others, feeling trapped or experiencing unbearable pain.
- Appears depressed, anxious, disinterested, irritable, humiliated or agitated, or suddenly appears to have rapidly improved after previously displaying those moods.

- Increases use of alcohol or drugs.
- Withdraws from activities and isolates from friends and family.
- Reduces effort at school, stops trying academically or increases absences.
- Exhibits changes in sleeping or eating patterns; is always fatigued or is not sleeping.
- Conducts internet searches for materials/ways for self-harm.
- Says goodbye to family or friends; gives possessions away.
- Displays aggressive behaviors.
- Makes unusual or cryptic social media posts related to the above (being a burden, saying goodbye, etc.).

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARENTS AND TEENS

THE ROLE OF BULLYING IN MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE RISK

The relationship between bullying and the impacts it has on mental health and suicide is complex. It is important to note that the large majority of people who experience bullying do not go on to die by suicide. Research suggests that both those who experience bullying as well as those who engage in bullying behavior may be at a higher risk for suicide than their peers who do not experience or engage in bullying behavior. While suicide is complicated and never singularly caused, it is important to note that difficult peer relationships can be a source of ongoing stress, especially for those who may also be coping with mental health concerns. Research on this topic is always evolving, but there are some key takeaways on the topics, and what to watch for in your teen.

While suicide risk and bullying behavior are not causally linked, persistent bullying can lead to worsening feelings of isolation, rejection, exclusion, despair, depression and anxiety, all of which are health factors that can contribute to suicidal behavior.

It is important for parents to be aware of any stressors that may be present in their child's school environment and peer relationships, and to regularly engage with their child about those relationships in the context of their mental health and suicide risk. Whenever possible, talk to your teen about their experiences with peers and help them to problem-solve ways to reduce those stressors. It is often helpful to regularly ask your child about friends or peers that they may also be worried about in terms of mental health and suicide risk, since many teens will talk to a peer about suicide before reaching out to any adults for help.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE RISK

The research in this area is emerging and social media continues to evolve at a rapid rate.

Many people use social media with a mixture of positive and negative effects. For young people with existing risk factors, including depression, anxiety disorders, low self-esteem or extreme interpersonal sensitivity, social media use can have compounding negative effects on their mental health.

It is important to note that young people may also use social media to reach out for help or to indicate their distress behaviorally or verbally (for example, suddenly "disconnecting" from social networks, making statements on social media indicating a desire to hurt others, for suicide, to die, or to escape their pain, or disclosures about gaining access to lethal means). Often the first people to see or hear these kinds of posts are the teen's siblings or friends. Just as we encourage young people to alert adults if they notice or hear these things being said, they should also be encouraged to notify an adult if they are concerned about a peer's social media activities.

It may not be possible to always control what a teen sees or writes on social media, but one thing that can be controlled is the amount of access they have to the platforms. Parents should be aware that for some individuals, extended use of social media may contribute to worsening mental health outcomes, such as increases in depression. Some parents and teens decide to take long breaks from social media to disconnect from online conversations and reset their mental health. Consider this option with your teen and engage with them about the effects that social media use has on their overall mental health and wellness.

WHEN AND HOW TO TAKE ACTION

Once a parent recognizes or even begins to suspect signs of suicide risks in his or her teen, the most important thing is to reach out and talk with your young person. If you suspect your teen is in crisis or faces an imminent risk, the best thing to do is to contact a crisis outreach center immediately (see resources at the bottom of every page). Otherwise, start with a conversation to learn more and determine your next steps to help your teen. Each parent may have a different comfort level with broaching the topic, as well as a different level of openness with your teen, but the suggestions below can help you set the framework for a strong first effort.

As you approach this conversation, remember that your tone and questions should not sound like an interrogation or judgment – it's okay in your initial conversation to let your teen know that he or she does not have to talk “right now” and that you are there when he or she is ready.

For more advice on starting this conversation, visit <https://afsp.org/realconvo>, or follow these tips:

- Don't wait – trust your gut. If you notice changes in your teen's normal behavior, such as becoming more withdrawn, disconnecting from friends, or grades dropping, or they're just not being themselves, that's a time to connect and talk with them about their feelings and mental health and consider reaching out to a healthcare professional. Talking about mental health or suicide does not increase risk.
- Ask your teen specifically about suicide and suicidal thoughts. Here's how: “Sometimes when people are feeling overwhelmed, they may have thoughts of suicide. Have you had those kinds of thoughts?” If your teen indicates suicidal thoughts or you are left feeling uneasy, reach out to a healthcare professional for further assessment.
- Hold all discussions in a nonjudgmental, empathetic manner. Listening and conveying that you are here to help are more important than giving advice. Stay in regular touch with teachers and coaches, as well as your teen's friends and teammates.
- Follow up regularly and express your care and concern. If you don't see any improvements or your child continues to struggle, seek help.
- Contact a healthcare professional. While a mental health professional is ideal, you can also turn to your child's primary care physician or even a walk-in clinic, urgent care center or emergency services as needed.
- Secure your firearms, medicines and harmful chemicals and ensure that all family members who have access to them know the procedures to keep them secure. This means not having firearms, ammunition, lock keys and other methods of security accessible to the person who is distressed.

A note for parents of younger children:

The suicide rate among youth 10–14 years old nearly tripled from 2007 to 2017, showing that, while more rare, suicide can also be a cause of death for children younger than teens. Intervening with youth in younger demographics is even more challenging, as this age group may not be able to express emotions and feelings as easily. However, early intervention is key, and we recommend that parents who have concerns about their child's mental health – and especially worries that he or she may engage in harmful activity – reach out to a mental health professional as a first step.

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO FIREARMS

Complementing the crucial role of mental health support, removing or reducing a potentially suicidal person's access to lethal means can be the difference in stopping a tragedy. Because firearms are the leading means used in teen suicide, securing a firearm is one of the most important steps a parent can take to prevent a suicide attempt or act of violence.

There are multiple options to store a firearm, and the right choice will depend on how many firearms you need to secure, your budget and whether you need to transport the firearm.






There are several best practices for responsible and secure firearm storage for anyone, and especially where there may be someone at risk:

- Store firearms unloaded, and store ammunition separately in locked storage, when not in use.
- Consider disassembling firearms as an added measure of security to prevent access – know the functionality of each firearm you own, so you can safely disassemble and store it.
- Double check that your firearm is unloaded when moving it in or out of storage.
- Use multiple safeguards at once – see table of options on the following page.

Go to the next page to see the different types of safe storage methods and find what works for your lifestyle.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE ►

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO FIREARMS

METHOD	DESCRIPTION	PROS	CONS
Cable Lock 	A cable lock can be used on most firearms, allows for quick access in an emergency and offers security from theft. The cable runs through the barrel or action of a firearm to prevent it from being accidentally fired, requiring either a key or combination to unlock it.	Widely available Inexpensive Can be used on most firearms Can also be used to lock a firearm to another object Allows for quick access Renders the firearm inoperable	Cable can be cut Need to keep keys/combination secure Single firearm use, whereas some other safe storage devices have room to secure multiple firearms
Gun Case 	For those looking to conceal, protect or legally transport a firearm, a gun case is an affordable solution available in a variety of materials including plastic, fabric or metal. Be sure to lock it with an external device like a cable-style gun lock for added security.	Widely available Inexpensive Portable and allows for simple, safe transport of a firearm Protects the firearm from damage Can secure multiple firearms	Most secure when paired with an additional device, like a cable-style gun lock
Lock Box 	With integrated locks, storage boxes provide reliable protection for firearms, and allow gun owners to legally transport them outside of their home.	Ensures safety even if gun is already loaded Portable Protects the firearm from damage Can secure multiple firearms	Can be more expensive than other firearm storage options
Electronic Lock Box 	Electronic lock boxes are an effective way to store or legally transport firearms, and they also prevent theft, since only the person with the code can access the contents. Some electronic lock boxes are specially designed for quick access to stored firearms.	Portable Only firearm owner knows the code for the electronic lock (dual purpose as a theft deterrent) Can secure multiple firearms	Can be more expensive than other firearm storage options
Full Size and/or Biometric Gun Safe 	A gun safe protects its contents from the elements and allows owners to safely store multiple firearms in one place. Gun safes of all sizes are now available with biometric options to ensure only certain people have access.	Biometric aspect only allows the firearm owner to access the safe through a digital identification of a person's unique human characteristic, like a finger or hand print Prevents against thefts Can secure multiple firearms	Most expensive option

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE ►

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO FIREARMS

STORAGE ACCESSORIES

Parents should also be aware that gun safe monitors can provide awareness and alert you if anyone is accessing your storage device or handling your firearm without your authorization. Some sound an audible alarm, while others connect to your smartphone.

OFF-SITE STORAGE

Another option for parents concerned about having a teen access a firearm for lethal means is temporary off-site storage with a family member or friend, at a gun range or firearm retailer or with law enforcement. [Check your state's laws](#) carefully regarding firearm transfers if considering this option to avoid committing a crime by making an illegal transfer.

FIREARM ACCESS AT A GUN RANGE OR ON A HUNTING TRIP

While parents can take every precaution at home, there will be times when their teen may encounter a firearm outside the home. For many teens, outings involving firearms are common activities to do with family, friends and through groups like Boy Scouts and 4-H. If your teen faces a number of risk factors for suicide, and a firearm-related outing does not seem appropriate for his or her current mental state, it's best to initiate a conversation about skipping the event at this time. Tips for doing so, include:

- Broach the topic with your teen and gauge his or her response.
- Express your concern in a non-judgmental, direct way.
- Suggest an alternative activity to do instead – either together or with a trusted family member or friend.
- Ensure your suggestion does not come across as a punishment.
- If your teen previously participated in these activities, acknowledge that fact, but re-express that this is a temporary precaution out of an abundance of concern.
- Recommend that you and your teen re-evaluate participating in a firearm-related activity at a future time.

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO OTHER LETHAL MEANS

OTHER LETHAL MEANS

While firearms are the leading means by which teens attempt suicide, parents also need to consider whether their teen has access to other means of harming themselves or others, including:

- Prescription or illicit drugs
- Alcohol
- Chemicals
- Other weapons, including knives, dangerous tools or even the family car

SAFE STORAGE TIPS

Similar to firearm storage solutions, the best option is to lock these products so they cannot be accessed without your supervision. Below are suggestions to restrict access and keep your home safe:

- Secure medicine or chemical storage cabinets with a lock, or consider purchasing a medicine lock box for your home. Keep the key/combination lock code private.
- If your teen takes a medicine that is lethal in high doses, set up a system where a family member stores this medicine safely and dispenses doses as required.
- Remove chemicals and alcohol from the home if you are worried about an incident.
- Return expired or unused prescriptions to a safe location. The Drug Enforcement Agency holds National Prescription Drug Take Back Day each April and October, and many local governments have prescription take back repositories permanently set up outside of law enforcement offices, fire stations or municipal buildings.
- Closely monitor remaining levels of prescription medicines (number of pills, etc.) you take, even if these items are secured.
- Ensure all family members with access to medicines, alcohol and chemicals understand access rules and take serious precautions to re-secure these items after use.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

1. Teens face a great deal of academic and social pressure today. What are ways to distinguish whether your teen is just stressed out or is depressed?
2. What behaviors or actions would prompt you to worry that your depressed teen is contemplating suicide?
3. What strategies have you used to get your teen to open up to you?
4. Are you comfortable with your teen's support systems (friends, teachers, coaches)? How can you assess this without making it seem like you are trying to pry into your teen's life?
5. What precautions do you already take at home to keep your teen safe?
3. How can parents distinguish if their child is just stressed or if there is a bigger problem?
4. What tools does the school offer if you are concerned about a student?
5. What more could the school or parents do in this regard, based on what you've observed?

QUESTIONS FOR PEERS

1. If you were concerned that one of your friends may be contemplating suicide, what would you do?
2. If you had a concern, are you more comfortable talking to a friend's parents or to his/her teacher, a counselor or coach? Why?
3. Do you know how to start a tough conversation with a friend? What strategies have you used previously?
4. What would you do if you brought up suicide to a friend but he or she refused to get help?
5. Do you know where to go to find more help on the topic?

QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

1. Have you experienced a time when a teen (student you teach, counsel or coach) confided in you about something that made you worried they could hurt themselves or others? How did you handle it?
2. Do you try to monitor your students for signs they are feeling troubled? If so, what can you share to help other educators do this effectively?

Use these questions to facilitate discussions at workshops, support gatherings or other meetings.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT TEEN MENTAL HEALTH, BULLYING, SUICIDE PREVENTION AND FIREARM SAFETY

These resources provide additional information on teen mental health and firearm safety.

For bullying- and cyberbullying-specific resources, turn to [StopBullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov).

VIDEO RESOURCES

[Seize the Awkward](#)

[Talking with Kids About Gun Safety Video](#)

[Storing a Gun Safely and Securely Video](#)

INTERACTIVE RESOURCES

[Seize the Awkward Conversation Starters](#)

[Firearm Safety and Storage Assessment Quiz](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

[Seize the Awkward Toolkit](#)

[Firearms and Suicide Prevention](#)

[Safe Storage Options Infographic](#)

[10 Tips for Firearm Safety in Your Home](#)

[Store Your Firearms Responsibly Brochure](#)

[Teens and Suicide: What Parents Should Know](#)

[Have a #RealConvo](#)