

GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL GATEKEEPERS

Supporting Document To The Idaho Guidelines for Suicide Prevention in Schools

Very few suicides or suicide attempts take place in schools. However, many young people who are at risk of suicide attend school and exhibit warning signs that, if recognized and acted on, could prevent death or injury and reduce emotional suffering. As a staff member, you have day-to-day contact with many young people, more so than any other professional and often more than their families. Some of these young people have problems that could result in serious injury or even death by their own hand. You are, therefore, well-positioned to observe students' behavior and to act when you suspect that a student may be at risk of self-harm. Specific steps can be taken to identify and to help young people at risk, especially if your school has created a structure that can support your efforts to safeguard the health and safety of its students.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

Suicide and other self-destructive behaviors rarely occur without some warning signs. You, perhaps from seeing your students daily, can assess what is "normal" adolescent behavior and what may be an indication that something is wrong.

Here are some signs that a young person may be considering suicide:

- **A suddenly deteriorating academic performance.** Teens who were typically conscientious about their school work and who are now neglecting assignments, cutting classes, or missing school altogether, may be experiencing problems that can affect their academic success, behavior, and health and can put them at risk of suicide.
- **Self-mutilation.** Some young people resort to cutting their arms or legs with razor blades and other sharp objects to cope with emotional pain. Self-mutilation of this type is an unmistakable sign that something is wrong.
- **A fixation with death or violence.** Teens may express this fixation through poetry, essays, doodling, or other artwork. They may be preoccupied with violent movies, video games, and music, or may be fascinated with weapons.
- **Unhealthy peer relationships.** Teens whose circle of friends dramatically changes for no apparent reason, who don't have friends, or who begin associating with other young people known for substance abuse or other risky behaviors may signal a change in their emotional lives. Their destructive behaviors may discourage more stable friends from associating with them, or they themselves may reject former friends who "don't understand [them] any more."
- **Volatile mood swings or a sudden change in personality.** Students who become sullen, silent, and withdrawn or angry and acting out, may have problems that can lead to suicide.
- **Indications that the student is in an unhealthy, destructive, or abusive relationship.** This may include abusive relationships with peers or family members. Signs of an abusive relationship may include unexplained bruises, a swollen face, or other injuries, particularly if the student refuses to discuss them.
- **Risk-taking behaviors.** Risk-taking behaviors are symptomatic and often co-occur with underlying emotional or social problems. Such behaviors as unprotected or promiscuous sex, alcohol or other drug use, driving recklessly or without a license, petty theft, or vandalism, especially by young people who formerly did not engage in these activities, can be an indication that something is wrong.
- **Signs of an eating disorder.** An eating disorder is an unmistakable sign that a student needs help. A dramatic change in weight that is not associated with a medically supervised diet may also indicate that something is wrong.

- **Difficulty in adjusting to gender identity.** Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered teens have higher suicide attempt rates than their heterosexual peers. While coming to terms with gender identity can be challenging for many young people, gay and lesbian youth face social pressures that can make this adjustment especially difficult.
- **Bullying.** Children and adolescents, who are bullied, as well as those who bully, are at increased risk of depression and suicidal ideation.
- **Depression.** Although most people who are clinically depressed do not attempt suicide, depression significantly increases the risk of suicide. Symptoms of depression include:
 - o A sudden worsening in academic performance
 - o Withdrawal from friends and extracurricular activities
 - o Expressions of sadness and hopelessness, or anger and rage
 - o A sudden decline in enthusiasm and energy
 - o Overreaction to criticism
 - o Lowered self-esteem, or feelings of guilt
 - o Indecision, lack of concentration, and forgetfulness
 - o Restlessness and agitation or outbursts of anger or rage
 - o Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
 - o Unprovoked episodes of crying
 - o Sudden neglect of appearance and hygiene
 - o Fatigue
 - o The abuse of alcohol or other drugs as young people try to "self-medicate" their emotional pain

WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE THAT DEMAND IMMEDIATE ACTION

- Talking or writing about suicide or death
- Giving direct verbal cues, such as "I wish I were dead" and "I'm going to end it all"
- Giving less direct verbal cues, such as "You will be better off without me," "What's the point of living?," "Soon you won't have to worry about me," and "Who cares if I'm dead, anyway?"
- Isolating from friends and family
- Expressing the belief that life is meaningless
- Giving away prized possessions
- Exhibiting a sudden and unexplained improvement in mood after being depressed or withdrawn
- Neglecting his or her appearance and hygiene
- Dropping out of school or social, athletic, and/or community activities
- Obtaining a weapon (such as a firearm) or another means of hurting him- or herself (such as prescription medications)

Responding to the Warning Signs

- It takes time and courage to **reach out to students** on a personal level, but your interest can be a lifeline to a child in crisis. Young people--especially those with emotional or family troubles--need support, and school can be a vital part of that support. School may be the last positive social connection for young people from dysfunctional families or who are isolated from their peers.

- **When you observe behavior that indicates that there is a problem**--whether the student is acting out, withdrawing, committing destructive or aggressive acts toward him- or herself or others, or exhibiting a fixation with death or morbid themes, **take action**.
- **Consult with your school counselor, principal, nurse or other member of a crisis team** to ensure appropriate and quick assessment and treatment. You may contact parents/guardians if you are certain that they are not the cause of abuse. Many of the same signs that indicate a student is at risk of suicide can also indicate that the student is at risk of (or is already experiencing) other problems. You cannot always tell exactly what may be troubling a student and what the outcomes of these troubles may be. But you can be aware of when something is wrong and take steps to get the student the type of help he or she needs.

Below are some of the steps you can take to help students who may be at risk of suicide or of other problems that threaten their well-being.

Be Prepared to Act

You need to know what to do if you believe that a student is in danger of harming him- or herself. Many schools have procedures for this situation. If your school has such procedures, explain them to the student. **Never promise confidentiality.**

Do Not Leave a Student at Imminent Risk of Suicide Alone

- If you have any reason to suspect that a student may attempt suicide or otherwise engage in self-harm, you need to remain with the student (or see that the student is in a secure environment, supervised by caring adults) until professional help can be obtained.
- Let the student know that you care, that he or she is not alone, and that you are there to help.
- Check in with the student often after the crisis so that he or she knows that you really do care.

Get Help When Needed

- If you believe that the student is in imminent danger, get help from a crisis team member.
- If one is unavailable, you or another member of the school staff should call 911 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Tell the dispatcher that you are concerned that the person with you "is a danger to him- or herself" or "cannot take care of him- or herself." These key phrases will alert the dispatcher to locate immediate care for this person with the help of police.
- Do not hesitate to make this call if you suspect that someone may be an immediate danger to him- or herself. It could save that person's life.

Use Your School's Support System

School districts typically have crisis policies for working with suicidal or violent students, students who are at risk of suicide or violence, or other youngsters who are not in this acute state of crisis but still need support to stay in school and stay healthy.

- Familiarize yourself with these policies and programs and use them when appropriate.
- If your school doesn't have such a policy in place, ask your school administrator to help create a comprehensive school crisis plan. See Guidelines for School-Based Suicide Intervention by going back to the Schools Main Page and clicking on the Intervention link.

Connect with Parents or Guardians

- If a troubled student opens up to you about self-destructive thoughts or actions, contact that student's parents or legal guardian or ask a member of the school crisis team to call.
- If you believe that contacting the parents or guardians may further endanger the child (if, for example, you suspect physical or sexual abuse), contact the proper authorities.
- In Idaho teachers, as well as all adults, are "mandated reporters" and are required to report suspected child abuse to proper authorities. In Idaho, you may call 211 to report child abuse.
- You may also refer this to the school nurse or counselor if this is a school protocol, but follow up to be sure that someone reported to appropriate authorities.