

## Child Maltreatment and Suicide *For Caregivers*

**Did you know? Children who experience maltreatment are more likely to have thoughts about suicide.**

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death for teens and young adults.<sup>1</sup>
- For youth ages 14-18, 18.8% have “seriously considered” suicide, while 8.9% have made a suicide attempt.<sup>2</sup>
- These rates may be even higher for youth who have experienced maltreatment. In one study of preteens who were maltreated and in the foster care system, 26% had a history of suicidality.<sup>3</sup>
- Additionally, suicidal ideation, attempts, and death among youth of color have been increasing dramatically. For example, rates of suicidal ideation and attempts among Black youth ages 14-18 increased continually between 2009 and 2019. Over the past 20 years, the rate of suicide among Black youth has also steadily increased, most notably among those age 15-17 (annual increase of 4.9%).<sup>2,4</sup>



### Why are children and teenagers with maltreatment exposure more likely to think about suicide?

#### The research points to a few directions:

- Feeling like a burden and a sense they don't belong
- Psychological pain
- "Internalizing" thought patterns
- Lack of social support, access to mental health services, and self-compassion
- Not confident about solving problems
- Unable to re-think situations

**Research also shows risk and protective factors can increase or decrease youths' likelihood of having suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.**

- Stress and conflict in personal relationships with friends and parents can lead maltreated youth to consider and attempt suicide.
- However, maltreated youth who experience warm and supportive reactions after sharing about experiences of abuse are less likely to consider and attempt suicide.

**Importantly, accessing mental health services can decrease risk for suicide attempts specifically for youth with maltreatment exposure.**



# How can we help?

**All caregivers can help build protective strengths. Here are some ways you can do this:**

Validate your child's emotions. This teaches youth to recognize and trust their feelings and protects them from developing negative thought patterns that can otherwise increase suicide risk. You can validate an emotion without validating or agreeing with their behavior! For example, you can try something like, "Things have been really hard, I see how much you are hurting."



Take care not to invalidate your child's feelings when trying to provide reassurance. For example, youth with suicidal thoughts often feel like things are hopeless. When parents say things like, "You have nothing to worry about!" in an attempt to soothe, youth often feel invalidated. Instead, you can try something like, "I see how tough things are, and I'm here to support you."



Provide space for your child to make positive connections with peers and other supportive adults. This helps them to feel that they belong in their world, and also allows them to connect with multiple adults who could provide them with help if suicidal thoughts or behaviors come up. Building a positive connection between you and your youth is also important! Seemingly small things like making a meal or watching a funny movie together can help you to feel connected to each other.



Support your child in developing hobbies or volunteering in your community. This can help your child build positive emotions and a sense of meaning.



## References:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDC WONDER: Underlying cause of death, 1999–2019. Atlanta, GA: US Department of Health and Human Services, CDC; 2020. <https://wonder.cdc.gov/Deaths-by-Underlying-Cause.html>
2. Ivey-Stephenson, AZ, Demissie, Z, Crosby, AE, et al. Suicidal ideation and behaviors among high school students – youth risk behavior survey, United States, 2019. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Supplement*. 2020;69(1):47–55.
3. Taussig, HN, Harpin, SB, Maguire, SA. Suicidality among preadolescent maltreated children in foster care. *Child Maltreatment*. 2014;19(1):17–26.
4. Sheftall, AH, Vakil, F, Ruch, DA, Boyd, R C, Lindsey, MA, Bridge, J. A. Black youth suicide: investigation of current trends and precipitating circumstances. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. 2022;61(5), 662-675.