



# If You're Worried About Your Child: Tips for Parents

This may not be information you'll ever need. Unfortunately, though, we know that if you do find yourself in a situation where you're concerned that your child's mental health and perhaps a little worried that you're hearing or seeing things that may indicate your child is thinking about hurting or killing himself, where can you go to get some help on what to do? We can't give you all the answers but we can make some suggestions to help you get the process of a mental health assessment started. We can also provide you with some information to make you a little more educated consumer of mental health treatment.

- Think about the specific reasons for your concerns, and if it helps you keep them organized, make a list. It usually doesn't work to simply tell your child: "Hey, I'm worried about you." It's easy for kids to dismiss vague parental worries. If you're very specific- "You aren't yourself. You're skipping meals. Can't seem to get up even for things you want to do. You're not talking to any of your friends and you've been really mean to your grandmother, who is your most favorite person in the world." It's a lot easier to communicate with data than it is with feelings!
- Pick the best time for a conversation. You know your child's moods best- so use your knowledge to time your approach; it may not be perfect but do the best you can! Remember, make this a conversation, not a confrontation!
- Explain what you've observed. Your child may disagree, minimize your observations, or tell you in a less than kind way that you don't know what you're talking about. LISTEN to their response.
- If their denial is strong and they make it clear that even if they did have a problem you are the last person in the world they'd talk to, ask them to tell you the name of an adult they would go to if they had some kind of problem. If they can't answer, remind them that it's important for them to identify an adult they know will have their back.

- Don't stop there. Keep up your observations and continue that list. You may need to have this conversation more than once.
- If your child does tell you about a problem, resist your automatic instinct to dismiss it or fix it. It will be hard- as parents, most of us want to make the problems our children have go away- but this is one of those times when you need to take your child at their word. Force yourself to say the following three words -TELL ME MORE- and listen to what they tell you.

If this conversation leads you to think your child does have something going on that requires an evaluation by a mental health professional, what's the next step?

- You may need to check your insurance to get a list of approved mental health providers. Don't worry too much about the credentials of the person you select- if someone is on your insurance company's list, they will be licensed in their field. Your primary question when you call to make an appointment should be if they have experience doing assessments of youth who may be at risk for suicide. If they answer yes to that question, then ask how soon you can get an appointment. You want to get this taken care of as soon as possible. If you're told you have to wait more than a week or so, go back to your list and find someone else!
- In a suicide risk assessment, these are the 3 questions that a mental health professional will need to get answers to:
  - What's going on in your child's life right now that makes them want to die/ think about taking their life/wish they were dead?
  - What's the likelihood of your child doing something harmful?
  - What is the least restrictive level of treatment needed to keep your child safe?
- What this last question means is whether your child needs to be hospitalized- the most restrictive setting that insures the maximum amount of supervision and safety- or will they be safe in some type of outpatient setting.
- No matter what recommendation the mental health provider decides, you want to ask them the reasons for their choice. And write down what they tell you- we guarantee there's a good chance you may forget exactly what you're being told and you'll want to keep this information for your records.