

Recognizing Depression or Suicidal Behaviour in Kids

This may be a depressing topic, but teachers need to be familiar with it. Even in our small school we're seen these behaviours; unfortunately, parents don't always do something about it when it's reported. Let's look at the issue as it affects both Elementary and High School students.

Depression in Elementary Age Children

Once in a while, kids are sad. Usually, they get over it in a few days. But some don't. It is accepted by the medical community that kids can suffer from a form of depression sometimes called 'anxiety disorder'.

In children, anxiety disorder is the equivalent of depression. There may be a biochemical cause, just as there is for depression in teenagers and adults, and it is known that children who suffer from anxiety disorders are more likely to suffer from depression as they get older.

Thoughts of suicide are not a mental illness, but a serious potential consequence of many mental disorders, particularly major depression. As teachers at any level, we need to be aware of the symptoms of anxiety disorders, and know what to do about it if we suspect it. Anxiety disorders are not normal behaviour for kids, and it is important to recognize them. They can cause kids a great deal of distress and affect their lives in negative ways.

There are three kinds of anxiety disorders that teachers and parents may see in their children. Remember that these disorders are caused by the brain; whether a kid suffers from an anxiety disorder or actual depression, it's serious.

Separation anxiety

This is a deep-rooted fear that something bad will happen to their family, and it's the most common anxiety disorder in kids. Being separated from their family is frightening to them. They may get headaches, stomach aches, or diarrhea while at school.

Social phobia

These kids are very uncomfortable around other kids. They'll talk with their parents or siblings, but not with anyone outside the home. Sometimes they will refuse to go to school.

Generalized anxiety disorder

Kids who suffer from this may worry a lot about the future. They worry about how they will do in high school or college, even though they're still in fourth grade. They worry about upcoming tests, sometimes to the exclusion of all else.

Sometimes teachers and parents will hope that the stress experienced by the child is just a 'passing phase', and that they will grow out of it. But experts agree that it is a mistake to see it this way. Children who suffer from anxiety disorders may need therapy, and if they don't get it, may have feelings of hopelessness which could lead to depression, with cutting or even suicide as the possible result.

Signs a Child Is Suffering From an Anxiety Disorder

Some or many of these symptoms may be present.

- Frequent sadness, crying
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Decreased interest in activities
- Persistent boredom and low energy; generally, a lack of joy in their life
- Social isolation; the child prefers to be alone rather than play with friends.
- Low self-esteem
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Increased irritability or anger
- Frequent headaches and stomach aches
- Frequent absence from school
- Poor performance in school
- Difficulty concentrating
- A big change in eating or sleeping patterns
- Talk of or 'running away from home'
- Thoughts of suicide
- Self-destructive behaviour, including cutting themselves

A Checklist for Teachers

If a teacher suspects that a kid in their class is suffering from depression, a checklist similar to the following one can indicate that you need to tell someone about the problem. It will also be important to provide anecdotal evidence.

- Unexplained decline in grades
- Loss of interest in class work and discussions
- Gives up easily
- Little effort put into work
- Concentration problems
- Has trouble thinking or deciding
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of energy, tired all the time
- Disruptive behaviour
- Restless, impulsive, unable to focus, possibly hyperactive
- Antisocial behaviours, such as lying or stealing
- Withdraws from company of other kids
- Doesn't want to participate in fun activities

- __ Loss of appetite
- __ Unreasonable fears
- __ Poor self-image
- __ Low self-esteem
- __ Feelings of sadness, worthlessness
- __ Talks or writes about suicide or death
- __ Unhappy, when other kids are happy

If you're familiar with the symptoms of depression, you can see that childhood anxiety disorders are very similar. It is suspected that they have the same biochemical cause, and it is accepted that kids who suffer from anxiety disorder will in all likelihood suffer from depression as they get older.

As teachers, we need to be able to spot these early indicators and tell someone.

Depression in Older Children and Adults

Major depression may be a disease all by itself, or it may be a corollary symptom of something else, such as untreated OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) or untreated bipolar disorder.

Teenagers or adults suffering from chronic major depression are always at risk for suicide. Teachers need to watch for the signs.

Any of the following could be potential warning signs for suicide in teenagers:

- Excessive sadness, or dramatic mood swings
- Withdrawal: wanting to be alone, loss of interest in friends or fun activities
- Changes in personality or appearance
- Dangerous or harmful behaviour: reckless driving, engaging in unsafe sex, increased use of drugs or alcohol
- A recent life crisis: divorce of parents, relationship problems
- Threatening suicide: Not everyone who is considering suicide will say that they are, and not everyone who hints at suicide will follow through with it. However, talk of suicide should always be taken seriously.

Suicide rates are highest in teens, young adults, and the elderly. The first two categories make it important for teachers to be aware of the symptoms.

The risk is also higher for certain groups of students:

- Students with a family history of suicide
- Students with a history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Students who are prone to violent or impulsive behaviour
- Students with substance abuse problems

Statistics indicate that females are more likely to attempt suicide, whereas males are more likely to be successful.

If a student you know is exhibiting the signs, don't be afraid to ask if he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide. Sometimes the person just needs to know that you care; they may just be looking for the chance to talk about what they are feeling.

Research indicates that the best way to prevent suicide is to be aware of the risk factors, to be alert for the signs of depression and other mental disorders, to be able to recognize the warning signs for suicide, and to intervene. As a teacher, if you suspect that a student may be exhibiting some of these behaviours, it is imperative that you tell someone immediately. Your Principal will know who to contact if your school has no counsellor.

I researched this article pretty carefully, but remember that, as a teacher, I am not an expert in mental disorders. If you suspect anxiety disorders, depression or thoughts of suicide in a child or teenager you know, get professional help. Don't wait.