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Suicide Prevention and First Nations Youth

Why a special edition on suicide prevention?

The First Nations Parents Club is very pleased to present this special edition of the Parents Club newsletter, which was made possible through a grant from Health Canada.

Suicide may not be the most pleasant newsletter topic, but talking openly about the issue is critical if the problem is to be addressed. In fact, the importance of sharing information about suicide is especially true for First Nations communities, which have some of the highest suicide rates in the world.

The First Nations Parents Club and Health Canada sincerely hope that this newsletter inspires local parent groups to take up the challenge of addressing the problem of suicide. Parents and other family

members have a crucial role to play in suicide prevention. Not only can family members do their best to care for their own children; parents can reach out to all children who need loving, nurturing relationships. Local parent groups can remind each other about warning signs and ways to prevent suicide from happening. Perhaps some groups could host workshops about suicide prevention, or find other ways to share ideas within their communities.



Please let the First Nations Parents Club know if we can do anything else to help with this very, very important issue. Only by working together and sharing resources will we be able to prevent First Nations youth from choosing suicide as an option.



Suicide and First Nations People

According to oral histories, traditionally suicide was very uncommon in most First Nations communities. Of course, First Nations have also withstood extremely serious challenges caused by colonization and oppressive government policies. Yet in spite of that strength, teen suicide must be recognized as a serious issue for First Nations across the country.

In fact, suicide among First Nations youth has been occurring at a distressing rate in recent years.

- Statistics show an Aboriginal suicide rate two to three times higher than that for non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- For young people between the ages of 10 and 29 who are living on reserves across Canada, the average suicide rate is five to six times higher than that of the non-Native population (statistics from Dr. Lawrence Kirmayer, cultural psychiatrist at McGill University).

Why are those numbers so high?

Suicide Factors

Research shows that suicide is related to mental health issues, high unemployment rates, low literacy rates, and low-income levels – and all of those issues are especially pressing in First Nations communities. Also, too many First Nations young people experience isolation, poverty, and challenging health conditions.

Teen suicide is also related to a loss of identity, which is a very real threat for many First Nations

youth. As a result of colonization and rapid cultural change, many First Nations young people feel conflict about who they are. That's why it is so important to support First Nations children and teens in developing a positive sense of themselves as individuals and as First Nations people.

In addition to those factors, researchers have identified the following factors that place youth at a higher risk for suicide, which apply to First Nations young people as well as the general population.

Risk Factors of Suicide

- Problems with school or the law
- Breakup of a romance
- An unexpected pregnancy
- A stressful family life, such as having parents who are depressed or substance abusers, or a family history of suicide
- A loss of security, such as problems with bullying or gang members
- Stress due to a new situation, such as moving to college or a new community
- Failing in school or failing to pass an important test
- A serious personal illness or injury
- Seriously injuring another person or causing another person's death (such as an automobile accident)
- Suffering a major loss ... of a loved one, a home, or a divorce

First Nations children must learn to understand their special identity through a connection with their language and culture. Helping children and youth to connect with their First Nations spirituality can also help to give them greater security and a sense of place within their communities.



Suicide Warning Signs

Is it possible to predict suicide? The short answer is no. At the current time, there is no definite way to predict suicide. However, the following signs, especially in combination, may indicate that a teen is having suicidal feelings.

Warning signs you might see:

- Abrupt changes in personality, such as becoming more quiet, aggressive, or irritable
- A previous suicide attempt
- Increased use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Sudden changes in eating, sleeping, or personal appearance
- Sudden changes in school attendance or performance
- Withdrawal or other changes in relationships with classmates
- An unwillingness or inability to communicate
- Extreme or extended boredom or restlessness
- Increased carelessness; becoming “accident prone”
- Unusual sadness, loneliness, or unexpected displays of emotion
- Running away from home, truancy from school, or other rebellious/reckless behaviour
- Withdrawal from loved activities, such as hobbies, sports, school, or a job
- Confusion and an inability to concentrate
- Chronic pain, panic, or anxiety
- Lack of interest or energy (or wild variations in energy levels)
- Increase in anxiety or anxiety related illnesses (headaches, stomachaches, etc.)



- Preoccupation with death, dying, or suicide (including joking about death or suicide, creative writing, poetry, artwork, and/or talking about death or cult figures who died by suicide)
- A sudden elated mood after a time of depression
- Talking about or making a suicide plan
- Giving away cherished possessions, saying good-bye, or writing a will / farewell letters

Warning signs you might hear

Often youth who are considering suicide will give clues through their comments. If you hear a youth make statements like these, take them seriously.

- “Nothing ever goes right for me.”
- “It’ll all be over soon.”
- “Whatever, nothing matters anyway.”
- “I might as well kill myself.”
- “I hate life.”
- “Everyone would be better off without me.”
- “I just can’t take it anymore.”
- “I wish I was dead.”



What First Nations Parents Clubs and Communities Can Do About Suicide

Why do youth attempt suicide? Unlike adults, young people often believe that all of the unhappiness they are feeling will go on forever. They can't believe that there might be a brighter future ahead, and they often don't realize that there are people who want to help them. Too many teens feel helpless and believe that they have only two choices – to live with the pain or end their life. It takes an entire community to change this perspective and give young people hope.

Recently, a Suicide Prevention Advisory Group published *Acting On What We Know: Preventing Youth Suicide in First Nations* (found at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/pubs/suicide/prev_youth-jeunes). According to that report, suicide prevention strategies for First Nations communities should include the following aspects.

- Peer counselling can be an important support program for youth. This practice involves training a group of youth in basic listening skills. Those youth can then act as resource people for other youth who are in crisis.
- Communities and schools can work together to help children and youth develop positive mental, emotional and spiritual health. Teaching young people about their cultural heritage is also an important way to help First Nations young people cope with their problems.
- Parents Clubs and schools can share information about how to recognize suicidal behaviour and the dangers of substance use.
- Recreational and sports programs can help children and young people combat boredom. They can also foster peer support and a sense of belonging.
- Workshops on life skills, problem solving, and

communications can help children and young people, especially when they are given by youth counsellors who can act as positive role models.

- Family and parenting skills workshops for new parents are also helpful, especially when they are based on culturally sensitive models of parental roles and responsibilities.
- Support groups can assist individuals and families at-risk, such as young mothers, recovering substance abusers, and ex-offenders who have returned to the community after serving time.
- Cultural programs and activities for the entire community can help to build the pride and confidence of all children and youth, and can help families at risk to heal and become stronger.

Quick Tip

Talking to teens about suicide doesn't "put ideas in their heads." For too many young people, it is something they are already thinking about, as shown by a survey of 26,000 BC students in grades 7 to 12 (the McCreary Centre Society).

- 14% of those students had thought about suicide
- 11% had planned a suicide
- 7% had attempted suicide
- 2% were injured in a suicide attempt
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadian youth aged 10-24, second only to motor vehicle accidents.
- In Canada over 25,000 youth attempt and over 250 youth complete suicide annually.

Talking is critical if we are going to change those statistics!



Building Self-Confidence

Here are some suggestions to help teens develop pride and confidence in their abilities.

1 We must all emphasize that success is not as important as getting involved and having fun. Sometimes both children and adults have trouble with this idea, but we can all do our best to share this perspective – including parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, and other community members.

2 Children need goals that match their ability. Children should be expected to do their best and to achieve the best they can.

3 Parents should encourage their children, remind them of what they do well, and try to help them make improvements in areas they find challenging. For example, parents can suggest ways to improve study habits if their children are struggling in school, or parents can help their children get regular exercise and eat well so they enjoy being active.

4 Don't **ever** let children believe that love is linked to their accomplishments. Love, affection, security, and acceptance are at the heart of self-confidence. Triumphs and defeats should be expected and accepted.

5 When your children feel discouraged – “I can't do that” – let them

express their frustration and acknowledge how they are feeling. Then remind your children of their special skills and talents.

6 Self-confidence is built through meeting challenges. Children can develop a sense of accomplishment through family games, neighbourhood sports, household chores, volunteer jobs, and helping with community and cultural events.

7 Don't hide your own failures. Did you struggle in gym class? Do you find it hard to draw? It helps children to know that their mom and dad aren't perfect either.

8 Be a positive role model. If you have a healthy outlook, your children will probably follow your example. Show your children that you don't have to be good at something to enjoy it. Remember ... a child's confidence comes from a solid foundation of family love and positive attitudes.



9 Embrace your First Nations values and traditions, and help your children to use their First Nations culture as a foundation for their self-confidence. Helping your children to understand and appreciate their rich heritage will help them in all aspects of their lives.



What is Self-Esteem?

Put simply, self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves. It is an emotion we feel about our worth and value.

People with high self-esteem view themselves as equal to others. They do not pretend to be perfect and they recognize their limitations, but they expect to grow and improve. They believe that they deserve happiness. People with high or positive self-esteem...

- Believe strongly in their own set of principles and values
- Genuinely enjoy life and are willing to participate in a wide variety of activities
- Feel equal to others
- Are able to resist peer pressure
- Feel confident in their ability to deal with challenging situations, despite failures and setbacks
- Are sensitive to and care about others
- Are more flexible and adaptable in changing situations
- Are happy, energetic, and enthusiastic

People with low self-esteem generally feel very badly about themselves, they are not satisfied with who they are, and they put themselves down either in front of others or to themselves. People with low or negative self-esteem ...

- Are very sensitive to criticism and afraid to make a mistake
- Are very critical of others and themselves
- Blame others for problems

- Are afraid to try new things
- Are uncertain of their own opinions and values
- May be jealous or possessive
- Sometimes have difficulty entering into loving relationships

Strategies for Building Children's Self-Esteem

One of the best ways to foster children's self-esteem is to help them to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for their experiences. Parents can do this by giving their children the freedom to make mistakes, and by helping them to view their mistakes as a chance to learn. Parents can also help by giving their children choices and helping them accept the consequences of those choices – good and bad.

- **A sense of security** is key to positive self-esteem. A sense of security includes understanding limits, knowing what to expect, and feeling comfortable and safe. Children develop a sense of security through positive relationships with other people – especially their families.
- **Belonging** is the feeling of being accepted by others, and it helps to nurture self-esteem. Children can feel belonging in their family, in their school, and in their community. First Nations children also develop a sense of belonging by learning their language, culture, traditional values, and rich history.

80% of children enter first grade with high self-esteem, but by the time they reach fifth grade that number has dropped to 20%. By the time they finish high school, the number of children having a positive self-image has dropped to a staggering 5%.

(Canfield, 1992, cited in Resource for Building Self-Esteem in Youth, Journal of Extension, Volume 32 Number 1)

- **Having a purpose** is an important part of self-esteem. Every person needs to feel that they are contributing something positive. Children can develop a sense of purpose by helping out at home, at school, and in their community.
- **Achieving success** is a key part of healthy self-esteem. By identifying and accomplishing a goal, children learn problem-solving skills and they develop a sense of pride. They then feel motivated to set more goals and develop their skills even more. Parents can help children by giving them opportunities to try new things and by encouraging them when things don't always work out right away.
- For First Nations children, self-esteem is closely linked to **cultural pride**. Parents can help their children by emphasizing the value of their heritage, the strength of their people, and the importance of their unique cultures and traditions.



How to Help

If you believe a teen might be suicidal, the following steps may help.

Listen. Adults often want to give advice and solve problems for teens, but sometimes all young people need and want is someone who will listen. If a teen does open up to you, do not offer solutions or tell them all the things they should feel good about. Take their distress seriously and listen to them without judgment. Just let them know you care and want to help.

Be proactive. To get a teen to talk, you may need to keep trying. A good way to begin might be to focus on changes you have observed, such as “I’ve noticed that you seem more sad lately. Can you tell me more about that?”

Assess the risk. The best way to find out whether a teen is thinking about suicide is to ask:

“Are you thinking of killing yourself?” Asking this may free a young person to talk about what they are feeling and to reach out for help. If the teen answers yes, ask more specific questions. “What method are you thinking about?” “When do you think you’ll do this?” “Do you have the means (guns, pills etc)?” The more lethal and available the means and the more definite the time frame, the greater the risk.

Get help. Do not ever agree to keep someone’s suicidal intentions a secret. If the person seems to be in immediate danger of attempting suicide, do not leave them alone. You may also need to take emergency steps, such as calling 911. If someone is in a suicidal crisis, do your best to limit their access to firearms or other lethal means of committing suicide.



Help is a Phone Call Away

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

www.kidshelpphone.ca

Kids Help Phone is Canada's only national, 24-hour, toll-free phone service for children and youth. It is confidential and anonymous. The service also includes web counselling and information. Kids Help Phone provides counselling services to young people between the ages of 4 and 21. They can also help adults find the counselling services they need. Every day, Kids Help Phone counsellors speak to kids from across Canada who have questions and concerns about issues like relationships, school, bullying, suicide and abuse.

Parent Help Line: 1-888-603-9100

www.parenthelpline.ca

Parent Help Line is a service of Kids Help Phone. The service helps parents and caregivers enhance their coping and parenting skills by providing them one-on-one professional counselling and referral services over the phone. And on www.parenthelpline.ca, click on "Order Free Materials" to find out how you can order Kids Help Phone posters, brochures, or wallet cards.

More Information

The following web sites contain more information and suggestions.

- The Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Centre of BC operates a 24-Hour Distress Line. That line provides free, confidential, non-judgmental support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for people feeling distress or despair, including feelings which may lead to suicide. In Greater Vancouver, call 604-872-3311. In Whistler, Squamish, Powell River, Pemberton or the Sunshine Coast, call toll free 1-866-661-3311. Call 1 800 SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) from anywhere in BC if in a suicide-related crisis. See also www.crisiscentre.bc.ca
- The Youth Suicide Prevention website, created specifically for youth, is located at www.youthsuicide.ca/youth/youth.htm
- The website of the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program includes information for teens and parents. It can be found at www.yellowribbon.org

Suicide Fast Facts

- Many surveys and research reports seem to show a link between substance abuse and suicide, especially for First Nations young people.
- Suicide contagion is the term used to describe the effect that suicide has on family members and peers. In many cases, direct and indirect exposure to suicide has increased suicidal behaviour in other at-risk teens. Following exposure to a suicide, family members, friends, and colleagues of the victim should speak with a mental health professional.
- Young men commit suicide more frequently than young women – a fact that is true for First Nations youth as well as the general population. But despite the greater vulnerability of males, young women are also severely affected by suicide.