

Social media, self-harm and suicide. How can parents help kids help a friend?

[top washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/05/15/social-media-self-harm-suicide-how-can-parents-help-kids-help-friend/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/05/15/social-media-self-harm-suicide-how-can-parents-help-kids-help-friend/)



Kids are using technology to share thoughts of self-harm and suicide. (iStock)

By Beth Swanson

May 15

“Mom, I need to show you something,” my daughter said to me, holding out her phone.

The post she showed me — which originated with a student that she knew “a little” then flew among friends and across the ether of the Internet — was about self-harm.

Suicide and self-harm are on the rise, especially among tweens and younger teens. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10- to 24-year-olds, and since 2009, the number of 10- to 14-year-old girls receiving emergency care for self-inflicted injuries has climbed 18.8 percent per year. Meanwhile, smartphone and social media use among teens

has exploded, and kids are using technology to and suicide. Tweens and young teens are reading social media posts and receiving texts from friends who may be struggling, and they don't know how to help.

Governments, schools and advocacy groups are working to keep up. The United Kingdom has linked the rise in suicide to social media, and is working to tighten laws around the content that is accessible to minors, including videos and posts about self-harm. There are apps designed for suicide prevention and online guides that teach people how to recognize a crisis occurring in real time over social media. Teens are trained through in-school presentations, or formal programs like Natural Helpers, on how to recognize and respond to a friend in crisis. Part of that training teaches students to "tell a trusted adult" if they are concerned about a friend.

Now I found myself, the trusted adult, sitting in my child's bedroom, feeling a bit helpless. I knew to report the post, but to whom and how quickly? I also wanted to help my own child, who was upset by both the content of the post and the idea that she might get someone else in trouble by reporting it. I realized that adults also need more information.

What parents can do

First, reassure your child. They did the right thing by coming to you, and it's important they know that you are going to take concrete steps to help.

"Most teens are not regularly sharing their peers' social media posts or texts with their parents, so when they do share something like this, it's critical to remain calm, nonjudgmental and pay attention," Manda Hakimi Ederer, a clinical psychologist in Kirkland, Wash., writes in an email.

In some cases, the course of action is clear. Any discussion that details a suicide plan or shows suicidal ideation is a medical emergency, and parents should react immediately. "A parent may need to call 911 and reach out to the parents or neighbors to ensure that the student who posted is not alone," Laura Smith, the executive director of the Snoqualmie Valley Community Network, writes in an email. The organization provides suicide prevention training for middle school students in Washington State. "Call local authorities and request a wellness check, but let them know why you are requesting so they can expedite the call."

If the post discusses self-harm, parents still need to report it, says Hakimi Ederer. "Contact the school counselor and alert them of this post or text," she writes. "If a parent knows the family of the teen, they can contact that parent directly and share their concerns."

In many cases, parents are also trying to respect the privacy of all the teens involved. Smith suggests being direct, reminding teens that "a mad friend is better than a dead friend," something her network also teaches middle school students. It may be possible to report a

post that several kids have seen without revealing who shared the post initially. But it's important to stress that reporting is always the right thing to do.

"Teens are often very reluctant about their parents alerting other adults. It's important to validate their feelings and to explain that the safety and well-being of this child needs to come first," Hakimi Ederer writes. "Parents have an opportunity here to model doing the right thing even when afraid and uncertain of the consequences."

Parents also need to be ready to face criticism. "We have to be prepared that the other parent may lash out," Smith writes. "If you decide you need to make the call to a fellow parent and you are not met with words of thanks and open arms, then please give them grace and space while knowing that you made the call you had to make. Love can make it hard for us to see when those closest to us are struggling."

Talk with your teen

After you've reported the post, actively support your child and discuss what they have seen. "Parents should not be afraid to ask their children if they have ever experienced those same thoughts, urges or behaviors," Hakimi Ederer says. "It's a myth that talking about suicide with your child will plant the idea or increase their risk. Talking about it will open the doors to communication about a topic that is often kept secret and gives your child permission to bring it up anytime in the future if they are struggling."

Teens also need to learn the best way to continue to help a friend, while still protecting their own mental health. It's tempting for teens to go into "therapist mode," says Hakimi Ederer, something that can cause anxiety and put pressure on a teen to "save" their friend. "Teens can have a hard time understanding that they are not responsible for another person's mental health and well-being. Parents can suggest their teen respond with 'This is serious, and I hope you are talking to an adult or therapist about this.'"

Have discussions early

It can be helpful, for both parents and teens, to have an in-depth conversation about how your family members will respond to texts or social media posts about difficult topics. Having a discussion earlier would have prepared us for the inevitable. But I wanted to protect my child, so I skimmed the surface, hoping she would never see a post, and scrambling to react when she did. We never discussed specifics — how she would report, and what I would do to help her.

Smith suggests helping your teen brainstorm a list of trusted adults they can turn to if a friend is discussing self-harm or suicide.

I missed my chance to help my daughter plan her response before this happened and show her I supported her and trusted her judgment. That decision was naive on my part. I wish we had talked openly before it became an immediate and frightening concern. Instead, we both scrambled, asking friends — adult and teen — who had already faced a reporting dilemma for help. It felt like we just muddled through. I'm still not sure we took the easiest, most direct or most effective path.

"Parents don't need to wait until their teens bring something concerning to them to start talking to them about upsetting social media content," Hakimi Ederer writes. "It's highly likely that their teens have already encountered something that has concerned them, or they will undoubtedly encounter this content in the future."

I've since taken Hakimi Ederer's advice; I've talked with my daughter about how to report, and about the distinction between helping a friend and assuming responsibility for another person's mental health. We both feel better prepared for the next time something like this happens. And that's important, because we're both convinced there most likely will be a next time.

Beth Swanson is a freelance writer living in North Bend, Wash. Find her on Twitter [@write4chocolate](#).