Preventing youth suicide: The voice of children and young people

**FAST FACTS**

- This research used an online survey of 472 children/young people who had thought about or attempted suicide.
- Thoughts of suicide can start young; 1 in 5 respondents was aged 13 or younger.
- 60% of respondents never received help. Of those who did, 1 in 5 didn’t receive help until after a suicide attempt.
- Young people fear being ‘judged’ or called an ‘attention seeker’, feel worthless and undeserving, and worry about hurting or burdening loved ones.
- Parents/carers are crucial supports, but many don’t know how to respond.
- Many young people who sought help had their feelings trivialised or dismissed, which exacerbated their distress.
- Judgmental attitudes can be found everywhere, including teachers, families, peers, medical professionals and psychologists.
- Relationships are key to recovery; young people value a caring relationship with a counsellor as much as any ‘treatment’ provided.

In 2015-2016, 472 children and young people who had thought about, planned or attempted suicide shared their experiences of seeking and getting support in an online survey. Their message to others was Don’t Judge. Listen. Care.

1. **Why are the views of children and young people with lived experience important?**

   Suicide is the leading cause of death of children in Australia; in the five years between 2012 and 2016, 89 children aged 5-14 years and 346 adolescents aged 15-17 years died by suicide.

   A national survey in 2015 found that 10.7% of females and 4.5% of males aged 12-17 years had seriously considered suicide, and 2.4% of respondents had attempted suicide.

   Despite years of research, understanding of ‘what works’ to prevent youth suicide and effectively support young people at risk is limited. Many young people never seek help and even those who receive professional support may not complete treatment.

2. **Why don’t young people receive help?**

   Young people don’t seek help due to shame and fear of being ‘judged’ or labelled an ‘attention seeker’, but most are hoping someone will ‘see through their smile’ and reach out to help them. Unfortunately, many survey respondents found that others expressed judgemental attitudes, trivialised their feelings, and in fact accused them of attention-seeking. This had serious consequences such as increasing distress and isolation, and delaying further help-seeking by years.

   Across a range of support sources, young people found counsellors and psychologists most helpful, while medical professionals and parents were least helpful.

   What mattered most to young people was a relationship with someone who genuinely cared, listened without judging and made them feel valued and important.
3. Strategies to improve service responses for children and young people

Greater efforts need to be made to consult and collaborate with vulnerable young people. For many reasons, they may be reluctant to access services and understanding what matters to them provides useful insights into how best to connect with them. Whilst evidence-based strategies and treatments are important, young people are more interested in relationships and want services to be less clinical.

Young people do want help. They seek it from a range of sources including parents, siblings, friends, teachers and doctors. Since a negative help-seeking experience can have long-term consequences, community-wide education to ensure every child or young person receives a positive response regardless of where they seek help is crucial.

Health professionals are particularly important targets for education. Young people can find hospitals frightening and intimidating, and some reported a hospital experience doing more harm than good. Others reported intentionally concealing suicidal thoughts due to a fear that emergency services would be contacted and they may be hospitalised.

Parents are crucial supports for young people of all ages, and need education and support, both for their own wellbeing and so they can effectively support their child. Learning that your child is thinking about suicide is distressing and many don’t know how to respond.

Psychologists and counsellors can make a real difference, but can be difficult to access, especially for children whose parents do not recognise their need. Finding the right service is difficult for children, but free teleweb services can help fill this gap.

It is important that both universal prevention initiatives and targeted services are provided to younger children as well as adolescents. There is currently a lack of affordable services for children under 12 years without a diagnosable mental illness.

* This summary paper was written by Dr Samantha Batchelor, Senior Researcher at yourtown, and is based on a series of Insights Papers available from [www.yourtown.com.au/insights/advocacy](http://www.yourtown.com.au/insights/advocacy).