



What to Do When Your Child Has Thoughts of Suicide

By Kelly Rosati - President, Hope for Brighter Tomorrows

EDITOR'S NOTE: *A version of this piece first appeared at ERLC in 2019, and again in ChurchLeaders in 2019. It has been revised and updated for HBT.*

Maybe your child said it out loud. Maybe it was said softly. Maybe your child screamed or sobbed. Maybe you found something you were never meant to find. Maybe the teacher called, or the police did.

I have talked with many parents in the hours after that moment. They are terrified, and almost none of them knew what to do or had a person they felt safe telling.

What follows is the parent-to-parent help I wish someone had handed me. Our kids with mental health challenges have experienced suicidal thoughts many times over the last 17 years, and thankfully all are still here. I share with permission.

Early trauma and mental illness take a hard toll on a young brain. My husband and I decided we want what we have been through to be of benefit to other parents, because we were comforted by God so that we could comfort others (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

***Note:** *This article is written for parents of children under age 18. A number of different factors regarding treatment and parental authority change once your child becomes a legal adult, so keep that in mind as you read.*

Caring for your child

The first hour

You will probably be scared, possibly confused, and very upset. Show up anyway, and show up as warm and as nurturing as you can, whether you feel that way or not.

Do this even if some part of you thinks your child is being dramatic, or fishing for attention (think of it as fishing for connection), or forgetting everything good in their life. Ask God to help you. He will.

Do not minimize what they told you, or preach at them. Do not try to talk them out of how they feel. Be tender, and give them all of your attention.

On the inside you may be coming apart, but your child does not need to see that today.

If your child has thought about a suicide plan, keep them within sight *all the time*. Even when it feels like too much.

What to say, and what not to say

Lots of parents freeze when they're trying to think of the first things to say to their child. Here are a few guiding principles around what helps and what doesn't.

What to say:

Start here and say this lovingly and gently: *I am so glad you told me.*

Then let your child talk. You do not have to fill the silence or fix anything in this conversation. You are trying to do one thing: make it clear that telling you was safe.

A few other things that help:

You are not in trouble. Many kids expect to be punished for saying it.

Tell me more. This is different from interrogating them about why.

I don't know exactly what to say right now, but I am here with you. I'm not going anywhere. Honesty lands better than a speech.

We are going to get you help, and I will be right beside you the whole time. You will not always feel this way.

What not to say

Do not say *you have so much to live for*. You mean it as encouragement, but your child hears that you do not understand.

Do not say *think about what this would do to me*. Guilt is not a safety plan, and it teaches your child to protect you by staying quiet.

Do not say *are you sure?* or *is this about the breakup?* You are looking for a cause you can remove. There may not be one.

Do not say *you're just tired* or *this is hormones* or *it's a phase*. Even if some of that is true, it lands as dismissal.

Do not say *let's keep this between us*. Secrecy is the opposite of safety.

And please do not make prayer your first response out loud. Pray hard. But if the first words out of your mouth are *have you prayed about this?* your child will think you're using faith to try to override their feelings.

Getting professional help

Brothers and sisters, unless your pastor holds a clinical license, your pastor is not the right first call for thoughts of suicide. You can tell them later and ask for prayer and practical help, like meals or someone to sit with your other kids. But right now your child needs a professional.

You may be worried about what they (or others) might think, but don't let fear get in the way of getting your child what they need.

If your child is in immediate physical danger, call 911. For everything short of that, 988 will connect you to trained crisis counselors, and in some areas they can send a mobile crisis team instead of police. If it is safe to drive (meaning another adult can sit with your child and you have child locks on the doors) go to an emergency room and start a behavioral health assessment.

If you're not in the middle of a crisis right now but think that something like this could happen, learn your local crisis numbers, walk-in centers, and psychiatric hospitals now. Write them down somewhere you will find them when you cannot think straight.

Do not make your child choose between faith and treatment

Please do not be reflexively against medication or against therapy. There is a spiritual dimension to all of our lives, and it's important to hold onto it. Just don't let it crowd out everything else.

And please do not hand your hurting child the burden of praying harder and trusting more. If you have already done that, you can go back and tell them gently that you were wrong. Let them know that God loves them, and that he is not going to leave them alone in this. Tell them that

having these thoughts doesn't mean they've done anything wrong. They need compassion, not anything that gets close to feeling like a scold or a lecture. Avoid those at all costs.

If your child is admitted

If your child meets criteria, the hospital may place them on an involuntary hold for their own safety. That means the hospital has legal authority to keep them safe for a short window of time. If the professionals believe admission is warranted, it is better to consent to it than to make them use the legal option.

If this happens, it may feel like the end of the world.

I have spent hundreds of days in psychiatric hospitals. I have cried in their hallways where my child could not see me. It is not as terrible as it feels in that first hour. Your world is not ending and neither is your child's, even though it feels that way.

Tell your child that yes, this is scary, and yes, it is good. Keep assuring them that the goal is to get them feeling better so they can get home - where they belong - as soon as they are well enough. Tell them you will call and visit, and then make sure you follow through.

Then say this as many times as you can: *You are brave for letting people help. It may feel like things will never change, but I know you won't always feel this way. You can borrow my hope until you have your own.*

The weeks after

Once your child is stable, get the step-down care in place. That may be day treatment (partial hospitalization or intensive outpatient program), or outpatient therapy and psychiatry. Ask questions and find out what exists in your area. Treat the professionals like the gift that they are, even if you find yourselves at odds with them about certain things.

Do not be unsettled when the staff seem unbothered by your terrifying situation. This is their ordinary week. Be kind to them, keep advocating for your child, and stay open to the counsel they offer. Walking with Jesus for thirty years does not mean you have all the answers for this. If this is new to you, know this: what you need is humility and voracious desire to learn.

You may be tempted to file the whole thing away as a bad dream and get back to normal. Keep talking with your child. Tell them how smart and brave it is to keep getting help. Resist the pull to "fix them" with easy answers. Keep loving them out loud. If they tell you hard things, let them know there is nothing they can say that pushes you or God away.

Caring for yourself

You may want to skip this part, but please don't. Your child needs you upright, and what happened to you was a real crisis.

Fall apart somewhere safe

Once your child is safe with professionals, go somewhere they cannot see you and let it out. Cry. Yell. Do not hold it in out of shame or toughness or habit. If you hold it in, your body will eventually collect the bill, and your kids need you.

You did a really important thing. You walked your child through a crisis and got them to safety.

Sleep and take the time off

Take leave from work if you have it, all at once or in pieces, whatever protects your job. If you can barely function, if noise and light feel like too much, that is a normal response to what you have been through.

Be gentle with yourself and with your spouse. Ask people to pray.

God is close to you. He is close to your child. That stays true whether you feel it or not.

What happened to you was traumatic, too

This is the part I wish I had known.

You were not the one in danger, so it can feel self-indulgent to call your own experience trauma. Call it that anyway. Your nervous system does not sort out who the crisis technically belonged to. It only knows that your child's life was at stake and you could not make it stop.

Here is what that can look like in the months that follow:

- You check on them while they sleep. You check again. You feel anxious when they are behind a closed door.
- Your phone buzzes and your stomach drops before you have read the screen.
- You replay the moment you found out, over and over, and each time you look for the thing you should have seen sooner.
- You feel numb at odd times, or you feel nothing at all, and then you feel guilty about the numbness.
- You cannot pray the way you used to.

None of that means you are weak or faithless. It means something happened to you and your body kept the record.

Two things helped me more than anything else. The first was naming it out loud to somebody who listened and understood. The second was getting my own care. When you have any capacity for it, find a good Christian counselor of your own. Ask specifically whether they have experience working with trauma. EMDR (a specific form of trauma treatment) has helped me more than anything else.

Find the people who can just listen

You need friends who will sit with you without offering fixes. People who will grieve alongside you and help carry the weight.

You will need boundaries too, and they may feel unnatural. You do not have the capacity right now to manage other people's feelings about what happened to your family. Not your mother's. Not your best friend's. This may feel rude, but do it anyway. If you skip this part, it will flatten you, and your child needs you.

Expect the crash

Do not be surprised if you come apart physically or emotionally or relationally after the crisis passes. Your body waited until it was allowed to. That is to be expected.

This might be a one-time crisis or it might be part of a serious mental illness you will live with for years. Either way, stay close to the One who loves all of you, and keep getting professional help. If the help is not working, keep going until you find help that does.

Our family has been walking this road for 17 years, and I cannot count the doctors and the medications we have been through. It is exhausting.

Take one day at a time. Do not borrow tomorrow's trouble. Keep things simple. Notice something beautiful. Get in nature. Rest in Jesus. Rest in bed. Get outside. Take a walk. Sit with a dog. Get near a horse. God does some beautiful ministry through animals. Paint or draw, whether you're good at it or not. Creating is healing. Dance it out – or get movement other ways. Your body needs to discharge.

You did a hard thing

Be proud that, by God's grace and wisdom, you walked your child through one of the hardest things a family can face.

You will have something to offer the next parent who finds themselves where you were. God never wastes our pain. He will not waste this, and he will not leave you.

You do not have to carry this by yourself. Hope for Brighter Tomorrows is a community of parents who understand this from the inside, because we have lived it too. If you're looking for a community to share this burden, we are here for you.

[Join Our Online Community](#)

If your loved one is in immediate danger or you are concerned about their safety, contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. If there is an emergency, call 911 and let the operator know your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis.

Disclaimer: This content is provided for general religious, educational, and informational purposes only. It is general in nature and is not tailored to individual circumstances. It is not medical advice, psychiatric advice, psychotherapy, or legal advice, and it is not a substitute for individualized care from a qualified licensed healthcare professional. Accessing or reading this content does not create a therapist-client or any other professional relationship. The author does not diagnose, provide psychotherapy through this content, prescribe or manage medication, or offer individualized treatment recommendations. Decisions regarding diagnosis, treatment, and medication should always be made with a qualified healthcare provider.

© 2026 Hope for Brighter Tomorrows. All rights reserved.
HopeForBrighterTomorrows.org