

# Suicidal thoughts start young: The critical need for family support and early intervention

Dr Samantha Batchelor  
Senior Researcher

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# Who are we?



- More than 75% self-funded by the **yourtown** Art Union, donations and corporate support
- Australia's only free 24/7 helpline for children and young people aged 5 – 25 years
- Phone, webchat or email
- Any time, any reason
- One off information or referral, ongoing counselling and crisis
- Professional counsellors

# Outline of presentation

- Age of children and young people contacting Kids Helpline about suicide
- Children's preferences for online vs phone support
- Children's experiences seeking and receiving support

## Two sources of data for this presentation:

1. Records of contacts between Kids Helpline counsellors and children/young people
2. Consultation with children and young people with lived experience of suicide

# Data source 1. Kids Helpline contacts 2012-2016

## ❖ 59 053 counselling contacts related to suicide

➤ 12 493 were with children aged 5-14 years

- 1552 (12.4%) concerned for another
- 10 352 (82.9%) suicidal thoughts and fears
- 403 (3.2%) expressing an immediate intent
- 186 (1.5%) current attempt at time of contact

- 4293 (34.4%) first time contact
- 2638 (21.1%) occasional support
- 4845 (38.8%) ongoing support

- 85% female

Note: contacts ≠ individuals

## Data source 2. Consultation with children and young people with lived experience of suicide 2015-2016

- ❖ 472 respondents to an online survey
  - 139 (29.4%) 14 years or younger
    - 95 (68.3%) female
    - 30 (21.6%) male
    - 8 (5.8%) gender diverse or 'other'

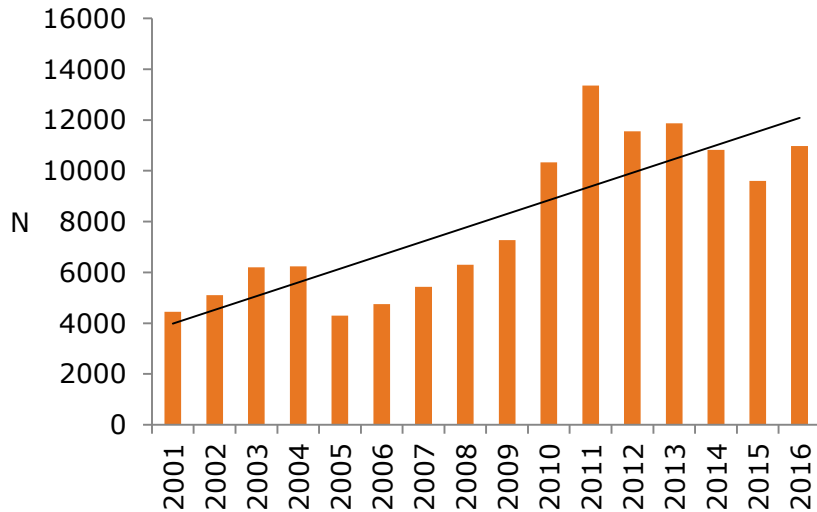
Papers available at <https://www.yourtown.com.au/insights/advocacy>



# Age of children seeking support from Kids Helpline

# Kids Helpline 2001-2016

Number of suicide-related contacts



In 2016, 16.9% of all counselling contacts were related to suicide

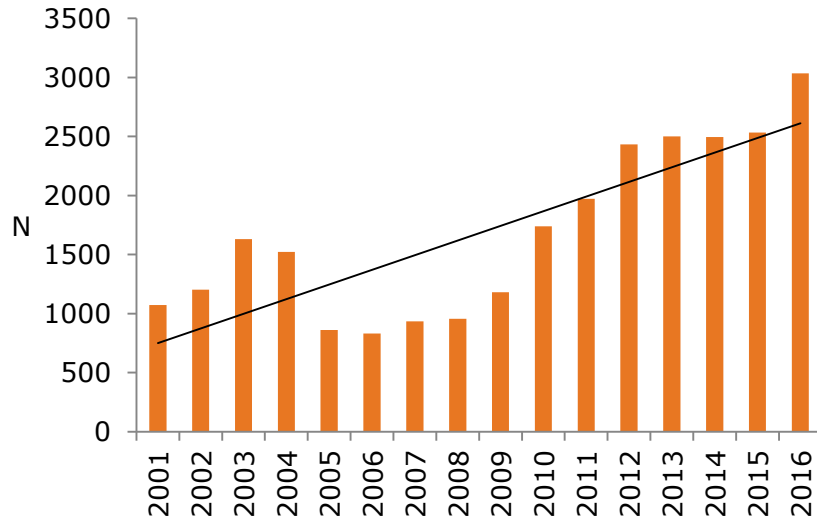
Suicidality is a growing concern for Kids Helpline.

Although there have been ups and downs, we are seeing a clear trend of increasing contacts related to suicide.



# Kids Helpline 2001-2016

## Suicide contacts aged 14 years or younger

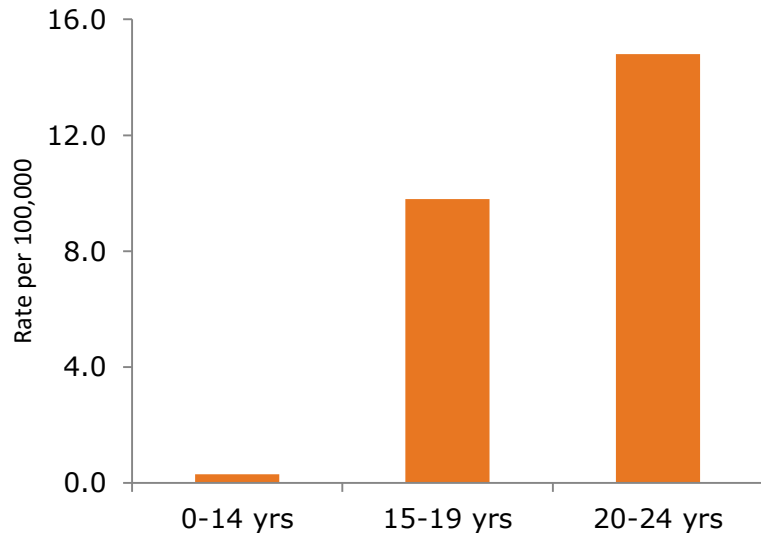


In 2016, 27.6% of all suicide-related contacts were with children aged 14 or younger

Many of these contacts are with children aged 14 or younger.

Suicidality amongst this young age group is a significant issue, but not a new issue – we have been responding to it for more than 15 years.

## Suicide rate by 5-year age group

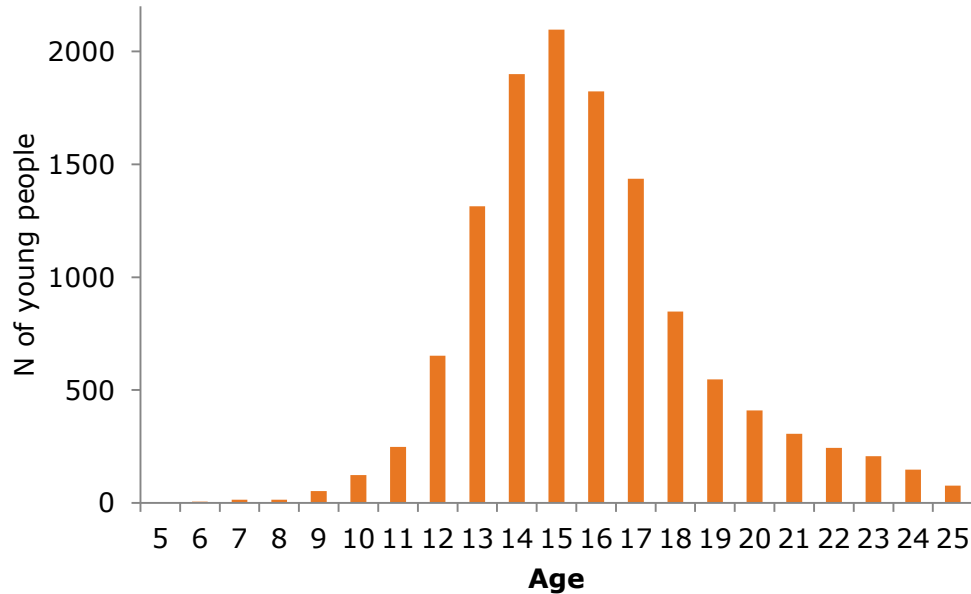


Death from suicide is rare in children this age group and publicly available data on suicide rates gives the impression of a sudden onset of suicidality around 15 years of age.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). *Causes of Death, Australia 2015*. Cat. No. 3303.0. ABS:Canberra

## KHL contacts by age 2012-2016

(first contacts only)



But records of help-seeking to Kids Helpline show that children start contacting very young, with numbers rapidly increasing between the ages of eleven and fourteen.

And we expect that for every child who contacts us there are many more we don't know about.

So my first point is simply this:

- suicidal thoughts can start young
- this isn't well-reflected in publicly available data  
(and I don't believe it's well known in the community)
- we need more data about the prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviours in children

# Are children receiving the support they need?

Data from our consultation

## Did you receive help when you were thinking about suicide?

		Yes	No
Age	14 and younger (n=138)	26%	74%
	15 – 19 (n=191)	42%	58%

$(\chi^2 (1,329)=9.313, p=.002)$

Less than half the respondents to our consultation survey had received any kind of help.

Younger children were significantly less likely to have received help than older teens – only 26% had received any kind of help.

## If young people did get help, who helped them?

	14 and younger	15 - 19
Parents	20 (71%)	48 (74%)
Friends	18 (67%)	51 (77%)
School staff	16 (59%)	46 (71%)
Helpline*	11 (41%)	42 (64%)
Family doctor*	9 (33%)	41 (61%)
Psychologist/counsellor*	12 (43%)	51 (77%)
Psychiatrist*	8 (29%)	37 (56%)
headspace*	8 (30%)	37 (56%)
Hospital*	5 (19%)	31 (47%)

The table shows the number and percent of survey respondents who had received help from each source.

The numbers for the 14 and younger group are small because so few had received any help. Nevertheless, there are some statistically significant differences.

For example, 61% of 15-19 year olds had talked to their family doctor, but only 33% of those 14 and under had talked to their family doctor.

\* Statistically significant difference

## In summary .....

- Overall, younger children were less likely than older teens to get any kind of help when thinking about suicide
- Parents and friends were the most common sources of support for all age groups, and younger children were just as likely to talk to their parents as the older group
- But younger children were less likely than older teens to get professional help, for example, from a family doctor, counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist.

**WHY?**





I thought the younger group may have received less help because they were experiencing less severe problems.

But from what they told us, that was not the case.

Children in the younger group were just as likely to have made a suicide plan or attempted suicide as those in the older group.

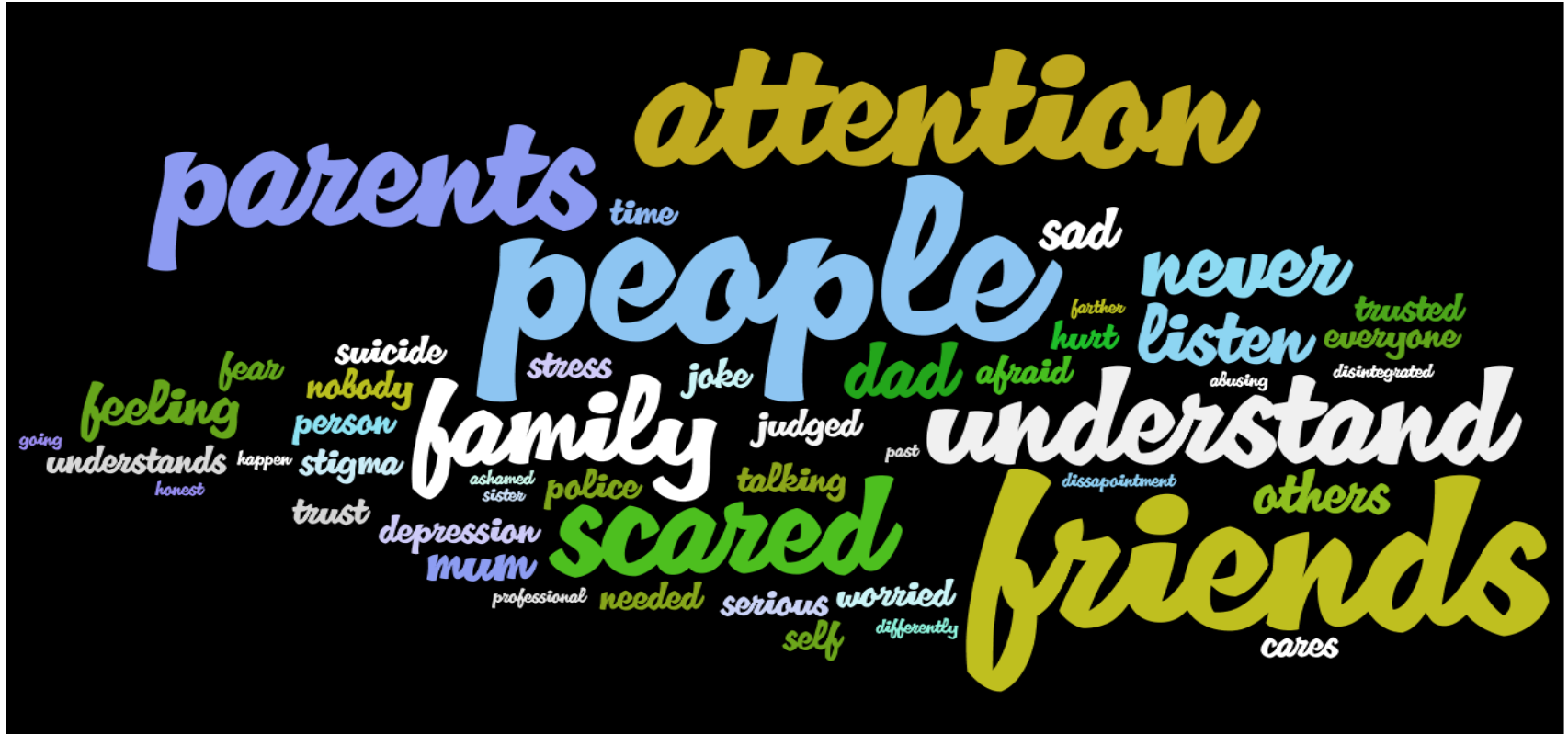
## Have you ever made a suicide plan or attempted suicide?

		Made a suicide plan	Attempted suicide
Age	14 and younger (n=136)	82%	54%
	15 – 19 (n=185)	80%	56%

## **Records of contacts to Kids Helpline also show that young children can be experiencing severe suicidality**

- In 2016, 57 individuals aged 14 or younger received a duty of care intervention
- Counsellors responded to an average of 2.3 contacts per week from a child 14 or younger expressing an immediate intent to suicide or engaged in an attempt at the time of contact

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# Children told us why they don't seek help

'It has a stigma. "She's suicidal". I'm a cis white girl in a good school, top class, nice family. I have no reason to feel this way.'

'I was worried that no one would believe me'

'At such a young age, I felt ashamed about feeling the way I did. I didn't want to talk about it with my parents or friends. I didn't think they would understand.'

'Every time I think of telling someone, I immediately think they will joke about it and say I'm lying and an attention seeker.'

'Me telling people how I feel will stress them out. I am also afraid I will hurt others with my sadness. I'm afraid of myself, I feel super insecure, and telling others will just spread the darkness.'

## They also told us that sometimes parents aren't very helpful

Of 116 young people who had sought help from a parent, 44% said the parent was 'not at all' helpful and only 22% said the parent was 'very helpful'.

	How helpful were your parents?		
	Very	Fairly	Not at all
14 and younger (n=20)	6 30%	8 40%	6 30%
15 – 19 (n=48)	11 23%	20 42%	17 35%
All young people (n=116)	25 22%	40 35%	51 44%

## Friends tended to be more helpful than parents

Of 117 young people who had sought help from a friend, only 14% said the friend was 'not at all' helpful, while 41% said the friend was 'very helpful'.

	How helpful were your friends?		
	Very	Fairly	Not at all
14 and younger (n=18)	10 56%	7 39%	1 6%
15 – 19 (n=51)	17 33%	27 53%	7 14%
All young people (n=117)	48 41%	53 45%	16 14%

While it's a good sign that friends are considered helpful, this is concerning, especially in the younger age group – when your friends are 12 or 13 years old, there is a limit to how much they can do.

Children need the support of a trusted adult, both for it's own sake and because accessing professional support requires adult input for a child.

# What happened when children asked parents for help?

'My parents assume I'm okay and I'm just trying to get attention and they think I'm trying to be "that person" when I really honest need help.'

'My parents just tell me to try and "get over it", its not that easy.'

'When I tried to tell someone close to me they thought it was a joke. They didn't take me seriously and didn't help me.'

'My dad tries to talk to me and it's really not helpful because I want to speak and tell him how I feel. He tries to tell me to stop being stupid or silly because to him it's just a teen thing.'

'My mother knew but did not want to talk about it much due to her father killing himself .... My twin sister never wanted to talk about it because she couldn't bear the thought of losing me.'



# Another issue - Service gaps

## An example

- 15 year old boy, client of FMHSS, a non-clinical early intervention service for children 'showing early signs or at risk' of mental illness
- history of behaviours such as talking to his wardrobe, washing socks one at a time in the washing machine, had thrown out all belongings except his bed
- attempted suicide in his bedroom
- CYMHS\* came to the house, but were unable to assess as he wouldn't leave his bedroom
- was taken to headspace\*, but wouldn't get out of the car
- only the *non-clinical early intervention* service was able to provide outreach support at home – talking to him through the closed door if necessary
- supported for 6 weeks until he was able to attend a clinical service

\*CYMHS is the Qld Government Child and Youth Mental Health Service

\*headspace provides early intervention mental health support nationally

# Questions needing answers

- **How common is suicidality in children in Australia?**
  - we need better data on thoughts and attempts
- **How do we provide education and support to parents of these children?**
  - especially when family relationships are often part of the problem
- **How do we reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking?**
  - we especially need to dispel the myth of attention seeking
- **How do we ensure children receive professional support when and where they need it?**
  - especially early intervention and outreach