

Preventing suicide:

THE VOICE OF CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Insights Part 3

Messages for parents
and carers.



KidsHelpline is a service of **yourtown**



yourtown

BACKGROUND

Between October 2015 and February 2016, **yourtown** invited children and young people who had lived experience of thinking about, planning or attempting suicide to share their experiences of seeking and getting support. The results of this consultation have been published in five papers, which are available on the **yourtown** website:

- Insights Part 1: Seeking and getting help.
- Insights Part 2: Young people's experience – What helps and what doesn't.
- Insights Part 3: Messages for parents and carers.
- Insights Part 4: Implications for policy and practice.
- Background, method and description of respondents.

This is Insights Part 3: Messages for parents and carers. These papers have been written for a general audience. We also hope to publish one or more academic papers in the future.

Thank you to all the young people who took the time to share their thoughts with us. Your insights were invaluable and are being shared with experts and decision-makers around Australia.

Some people may find the content of these papers distressing. If you start to feel distressed while reading, or you have been thinking about suicide, please talk to someone you trust or call a helpline.

- **Kids Helpline – for ages 5-25 to talk about anything at all**
24/7 phone counselling on 1800 55 1800 or WebChat between 8am and midnight at kidshelpline.com.au
- **Lifeline – all ages, for support in a personal crisis**
24/7 phone counselling on 13 11 14 or web chat between 7pm and 4am at lifeline.org.au
- **Suicide Call Back Service – for 15 years and over, support when you or someone you know is feeling suicidal**
24/7 phone counselling on 1300 659 467 or see suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Where to find more information:

- **Young people:** kidshelpline.com.au, ReachOut.com and Youthbeyondblue.com have some great resources and information for young people who are going through tough times or feeling suicidal, and for young people concerned about a friend.
- **Adults:** You can read 'Suicide – The Facts' at kidshelpline.com.au. beyondblue.org.au provide lots of information about anxiety, depression and suicide at any age. If you are a concerned

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 000 for an ambulance.

parent, they have a family guide to youth suicide prevention. ReachOut.com also has a parent site with information to help parents support their teenagers. Conversationsmatter.com.au has tips for safe suicide discussions and other resources for both the general public and professionals.

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THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF PARENTS AND CARERS¹

As outlined in **Insights part 2: What helps and what doesn't**, parents and carers are a very important source of support for children, adolescents and young adults: 60% of respondents to our survey who had received help had sought it from a parent or carer. When young people wrote responses to open-ended questions, they wrote about parents more often than any other person.

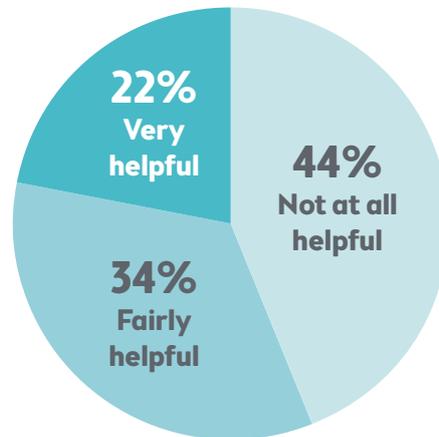
How helpful were parents?

As shown in Figure 1, 117 young people reported seeking help from a parent, and 51 of them (44%) reported that the interaction was 'not at all helpful.'

Findings from analysis of open-ended questions were consistent with this. Descriptions of helpful experiences rarely featured parents, but descriptions of unhelpful experiences were often about interactions with parents. When we counted the number of references to parents that described either a helpful or unhelpful experience, we found that more than 80% described unhelpful experiences.

We do not have data to explain the reason why so many young people reported negative experiences with parents. It is important to note that for each negative experience described in the following section, we are only able to report the perspective of the young person. Each parent would almost certainly have a different perspective, and both perspectives may be equally valid.

Figure 1. How helpful were parents? (n=117)



Many descriptions of parents' responses to a disclosure of mental health problems or a request for help highlighted a need for education to raise awareness, reduce stigma and increase understanding of suicide and mental health problems in children and young people. In particular, young people reported that sometimes parents simply don't believe them when they disclose thoughts of suicide and that they make light of their concerns. Young people want their parents to listen without judging, take them seriously, show that they care, and help them get professional support.

Also, the fact that we received numerous descriptions of negative experiences with parents does not indicate that most young people have negative experiences when discussing mental health with their parents. It may be that young people who have had negative experiences were more motivated to participate in our consultation than others.

Raising a teenager can be challenging; as one young person said,

Families need education to understand mental health problems and suicide. Parents often mean well, but don't know how to respond.

¹When we refer to parents in this paper, we are referring to an adult who plays a primary role in caring for a child or young person. This could include grandparents, foster carers and others.

"It's some crazy years for adolescence. Ups and downs twists and turns. You may love to hate them sometimes, but we know you love them."

Nevertheless, we believe that understanding young people's perspectives and their interpretations of their interactions with parents is crucial to encourage help-seeking, improve parent-child communication, and enhance families' capacity to provide effective support for their children.

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES AND SUICIDE

“My family is very supportive in their own way. But if they had been able to learn more about how to communicate with family members that are experiencing feelings of self harm or suicide, I feel it would have enabled them to connect with me more. Some of the things they did over the years that they thought helped had actually done the opposite.”

Young people’s stories suggested that parents often mean well, but don’t know what to do.

“They’d put it off to other factors: bad sleeping patterns, not doing things and being active in doing things (e.g. things I like to do) or being social, even online (which is where I spend a lot of time). And then I get really confused because my mum has told me multiple times that she really cares and it kills her to see me sad and if I want to check myself out for things, that is good. So it’s a constant push and shove of ‘yes this is a good idea’ and ‘don’t worry you’ll get over it.’”

Young people thinking about suicide often hold a negative concept of themselves and believe they are a burden on others. Hence advice from parents was sometimes interpreted as criticism and well-intentioned comments exacerbated feelings of guilt. In many cases, young people felt worse after talking to a parent than before.

“My mum will tell me that going for a walk or run would really help and joining the gym would help

but what she doesn’t understand is when I’m at a low I just can’t get up or do anything. I don’t have the energy to even eat let alone exercise! And that makes me then think my mum thinks I’m fat, I am fat, I’m lazy, she hates me, I hate me. And so on.”

“My mother tried to talk to me about suicide once, however, probably because she was uncomfortable did it in a very joking manner, then demanded I tell her all of my self harm and suicidal thoughts. I felt both undervalued and violated. I dealt with it by further pushing myself away from her.”

“My family weren’t really aware of the extent of depression I was in and so they would say/do things that they thought were small and insignificant but I went to bed and would cry myself to sleep.”

“Saying things like, ‘I would just die if you ever tried to kill yourself, oh you haven’t, have you?’... Sometimes people think they’re being helpful but they’re just making you feel really guilty and terrible.”

Young people’s responses suggested that some parents didn’t recognise that depression is an illness and hence didn’t understand that the young person can’t simply ‘get over it’.

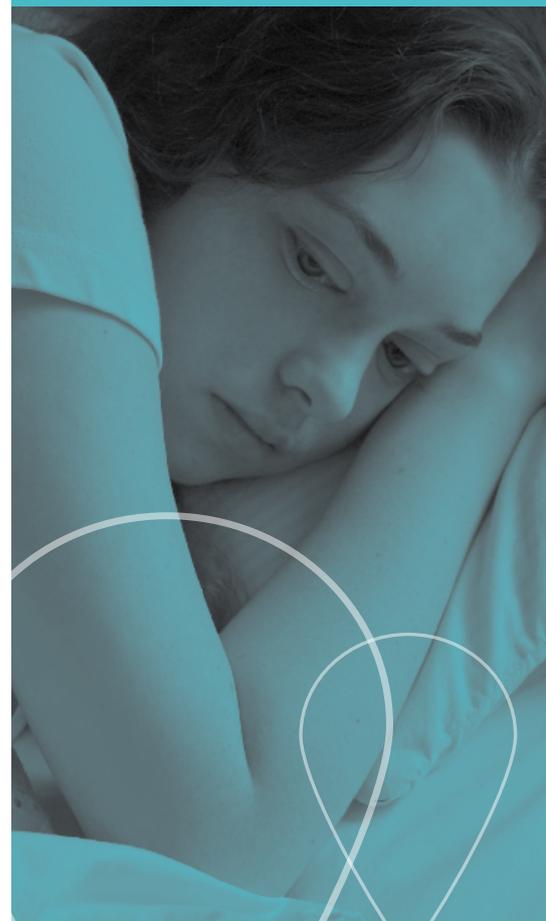
“My parents just tell me to try and ‘get over it’, it’s not that easy.”

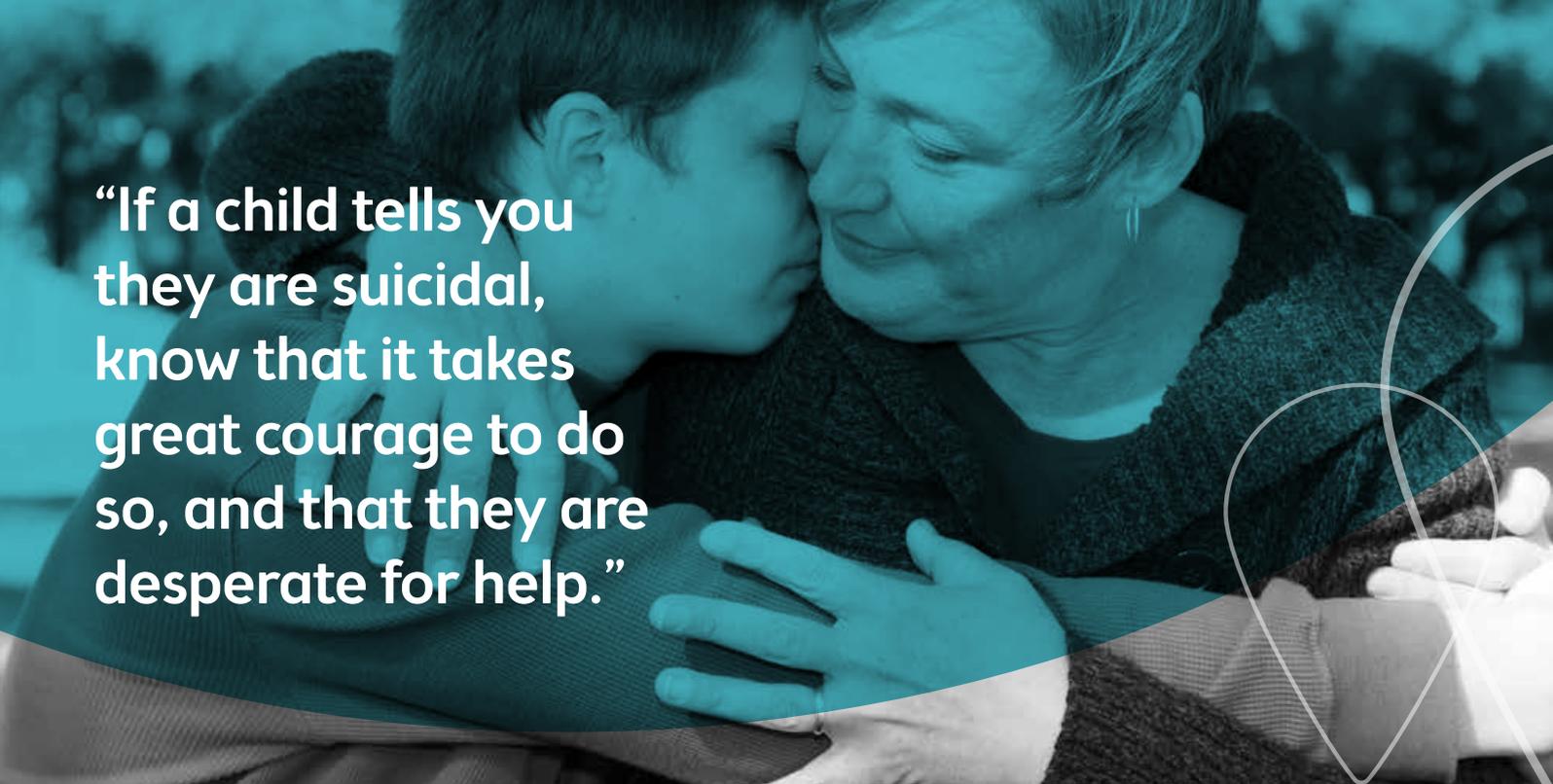
“Educate people on mental illness being an illness rather than a ‘flaw’ or ‘part of one’s personality’.”

“My parents, they gave me a lecture and my dad yelled at me which made me feel shitty and I cried.”

“My mum doesn’t believe in mental health problems generally and wasn’t supportive or understanding.”

“My parents always say ‘calm down’ or ‘be happy’, I know they mean well but they make me feel like I’m broken or something.”





“If a child tells you they are suicidal, know that it takes great courage to do so, and that they are desperate for help.”

“Having a parent who’s more supportive and has better education on how to handle mental health issues would’ve been helpful, as opposed to being told to ‘get over it’.”

“It is important for families to be educated on the matter ... Don’t treat the situation like it isn’t important and the person should be able to get over it, there is no quick fix.”

MINIMISING YOUNG PEOPLE’S FEELINGS

Many children and young people told us that parents trivialised their feelings, and didn’t take their concerns seriously.

“I can’t talk to my mother – she doesn’t listen, doesn’t care, doesn’t understand, doesn’t believe me, or downplays it.”

“When I first told my mum I was depressed she said I was too young and that I was being stupid.”

“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.”

“One of my friends finally gained the courage to talk to her mother about how she was feeling. It was really brave but her mother just said that it wasn’t true and that she was fine. Her mother didn’t even want to say the word depression.”

“My mum told me I was being ridiculous when I told her I felt huge. I didn’t really deal with it. Just made me feel alone and unsupported.”

“After building up the courage to reach out to my mum to tell her I was feeling suicidal and that I really needed help, all she said was ‘Try not to worry so much.’”

“I also wish that while my family tells me that they do always care, sometimes it seems they just dismiss my problems or dumb them down, so that makes me feel like they’re insignificant.”

PARENTS ALSO NEED SUPPORT

Learning that your child is thinking about suicide can be extremely distressing for parents. A number of young people described parental anger and distress, and we know from other research that parents of children who self-harm may experience anxiety, depression and social isolation. Parents need support, both for their own wellbeing and so they can effectively support their child

“Probably just with the distress of mum really brought me down, I felt guilty for making her worry and concerned for my welfare – sometimes she got so distressed she would yell and it wasn’t exactly what I needed at that moment.”

PARTICIPANTS' MESSAGES FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Young people want their families to:

- **Ask if they're okay and offer to help**
- **Learn about mental health and suicide. Understand depression is an illness and feeling suicidal is not a choice**
- **Take children and young people seriously:**
 - **they are not attention-seeking**
 - **it can happen to anyone**
- **Know that it's okay not to have all the answers:**
 - **just listen, be patient, show them you care, and**
 - **help them get professional support.**

"To family and friends, don't pretend to understand if you don't, we don't want advice we just want someone to listen and be there. We might not want to talk at that moment but knowing you're there in the future is comforting."

"Be there for your children, listen to what they are saying and don't be ashamed if you need to ask for support for your child from an outside source. It doesn't mean you're weak as parents, it shows you want what is best for your child and their health and wellbeing."

"For families – your child/loved one is not attention seeking, listen to what is going on for them and ask what you can do to support/help them and follow through with the plan you have come up with your loved one. You may feel the need to ask lots of questions but go at their pace. Don't blame or judge. Always be open, honest and LISTEN. Just as scary as it is for you, imagine how scared the young person is. Reassure them that it's going to be okay."

"For the parents: listen to your kids and be there for them. Don't judge them and let them receive help."

"Family, the person hasn't done this to hurt you or have a go at your parenting skills. Don't be angry, they are doing this because they love you. They think they aren't worth your love."

"Even if you don't understand, just be there as support, help them get the support they need."

"For parents/friends – let your loved one know that you are there. Listen without judgement and be there."

"For the family and friends, always be open. If you think your loved one seems a little more down than usual, a little more closed off, anything, then check how they are feeling. Even if their problem seems insignificant to you, it may be the end of the world to them. Be gentle. Be there for them, as I'm sure a lot of you are. Make sure they realise that they are loved, and will always be loved."

"Be there for the young person. Listen to them and don't make judgements. Don't get angry at them. They need support and love during this time. Allow them to seek support and the access to professionals and people outside the family unit. Not everything can be fixed by families."