



YOUTH AFFAIRS
Te Tari Taiohi



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**NEW ZEALAND
YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGY**

YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION IN SCHOOLS: A practical guide

**This resource will help schools
make decisions concerning their
role in suicide prevention**

Schools have a challenging and vital role to play in the development of young people. Tasks around suicide prevention can sometimes appear to be additional burdens within a very busy schedule. Added to this is some debate about the best response to take when trying to reduce youth suicide. This resource helps schools to deal with difficult decisions in this area.

IT AIMS TO:

- ④ **PROVIDE PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR SCHOOLS CONCERNING THEIR ROLE IN SUICIDE PREVENTION**
- ④ **OUTLINE CRITERIA THAT SCHOOLS CAN USE TO ASSESS EXTERNAL PROVIDERS OF SUICIDE-RELATED PROGRAMMES OR ACTIVITIES**
- ④ **SUMMARISE THE KEY FINDINGS OF A RESEARCH REPORT ON STUDENT FOCUSED SCHOOL-BASED SUICIDE PREVENTION**
- ④ **SUGGEST WHERE TO GO FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT.**



PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR HELPING SCHOOLS

This section summarises what we know are likely to be the safest and most effective suicide prevention approaches for schools to take. The evidence available about suicide prevention is not always consistent or comprehensive. However, this body of knowledge provides some important guidance as to how we should proceed.

The suicide of school students is a rare event (estimated to be only 3 percent of all suicides). Careful consideration of this advice can further contribute to reducing suicide levels as well as supporting other positive outcomes.

We know that schools can play an important role in suicide prevention. However, schools are not on their own because help is available. They can work in partnership with key agencies and health professionals in their community. The following key points can support schools in their work.

1. Establish a system to help identify students in emotional distress

Having the capacity to identify and support students in emotional distress is an important component of helping to prevent suicide and other negative behaviours. There are a number of ways in which this system can be implemented. Schools have two key resources to support such a system. They are:

- The publication *A Guide for Schools - The Prevention, Recognition and Management of Young People at Risk of Suicide* is designed to help schools identify students in emotional distress.
- School guidance counselling - This capacity is unique to New Zealand schools and provides the opportunity to have trained staff within the school environment to help identify, support and refer students to other helping agencies if required.

2. Establish links with key agencies and key health professionals in your community

Any effective response to youth suicide will involve a wide range of health professionals as well as the young person's family and community. Best practice within a school context will require effective and ongoing links with these groups.

Refer to the list of agencies at the end of this booklet.

3. Encourage a mental health promotion approach

The evidence suggests that mental health promotion is a promising approach. This approach incorporates the three inter-related aspects of:

- curriculum, learning and teaching
- the school organisation and ethos
- community links and partnerships.

Many of these aspects are referred to in this practical advice section.





4. Fully utilise *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum*

Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum provides guidance to schools in the planning of teaching approaches that will address health and physical education issues facing young people.

The Mental Health key area of learning in the curriculum focuses on providing students with opportunities to explore ways in which the physical, mental and emotional, social and spiritual dimensions contribute to mental health.

An important feature of mental health education is that students are provided with appropriate learning opportunities to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to make informed decisions relating to their well-being. These learning experiences will also enable students to develop strategies and safety procedures for avoiding, minimising or managing risk situations.

5. Utilise the Ministry of Education's professional development opportunities

Professional development is available for teachers, senior managers and members of boards of trustees to enable schools to:

- provide all students with a range of learning opportunities as outlined in *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum*
- consider and develop an understanding of the research and current thinking about resilience in relation to young people and to explore how this can be approached
- set mental health education in the broader context of health education
- focus on in-depth learning experiences that involve the whole school

- develop and implement plans that encompass a whole-school development approach
- incorporate relevant materials, such as the resources listed below, into their programmes.

The Ministry of Education and other agencies suggest that teachers use the supporting resources listed below.

- Ministry of Education's series *The Curriculum in Action*, Wellington: Learning Media Ltd. This addresses the Mental Health key area of learning.
- Christchurch College of Education (1995) *Caring for Ourselves and Others* (Volumes 1 and 2), Christchurch: Christchurch College of Education.
- Ministry of Education (2000) *Drug Education: A Guide for Principals and Boards of Trustees*, Wellington: Learning Media Ltd.
- Ministry of Education and National Health Committee (1997) *The Prevention, Recognition and Management of Young People at Risk of Suicide: Development of Guidelines for Schools*, Wellington: Ministry of Education and National Health Committee.
- Mental Health Foundation and Skylight (2000) *Change, Loss and Grief*, Auckland: Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand and Wellington: Skylight.
- Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (2001) *Mental Health Matters* (Years 7 and 8), Auckland: Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand.
- Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (1997) *Mental Health Matters* (Years 9 and 10), Auckland: Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand.
- Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (2001) *Guidelines for Mentally Healthy Schools*, Auckland: Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand.
- The New Zealand Police Youth Education Service (1998) *Keeping Ourselves Safe*, Wellington: New Zealand Police.
- New Zealand Police Youth Education Service (2002) *Kia Kaha*, Wellington: New Zealand Police.
- Ministry of Health (2003) *Health Promoting Schools: A Way of Working* (booklet one), *Health Promoting Schools: The Process* (booklet two), *Health Promoting Schools: Mentally Healthy Schools* (booklet three), *Health Promoting Schools: Support Manual, About Health Promoting Schools* (pamphlet), Wellington: Ministry of Health.

Ministry of Health resources are available from your local District Health Boards' Public Health Resource Service. Refer to the white pages in *The Telephone Book*.

6. Evaluate carefully offers of help from external organisations or individuals

Your school may be approached by an external organisation or individual who offers to provide a programme on suicide prevention for students or talk at your school assembly.

The report *Evidence for Student Focused School-based Suicide Prevention Programmes** gives criteria to assess the safety and appropriateness of an external programme or organisation.

The criteria are included in this resource on page 6. The report also includes a summary of how six programmes measured up to the criteria (Appendix Two of the report). It is important to note that this assessment has limitations, and those organisations will grow and develop over time.

It is best for schools to become familiar with the criteria and how to use them when making decisions. The criteria will help schools to assess externally provided programmes.

7. Avoid student focused suicide awareness / education programmes

The report, *Evidence for Student Focused School-based Suicide Prevention Programmes*, details the body of evidence around student focused, as opposed to teacher focused, suicide awareness programmes.

While the evidence is not clear-cut, the report concludes that owing to concerns identified by some research, it is advisable to avoid using programmes that specifically focus on raising awareness about suicide with students. This includes individuals who may want to speak to assemblies or smaller class groups.

8. Don't prevent students from talking about suicide but don't actively promote its discussion

Suicidal thoughts are quite common in young people. However, the vast majority of young people do not act on these thoughts. The issue of suicide currently has a high level of interest amongst young people. Instructing students not to talk about suicide is not likely to be an effective means of responding to this situation. It is equally important not to actively encourage discussion on this topic.

Being clear about how to respond is important. Suicide is the outcome to a complex set of situations / interactions. It is helpful to listen to young people and encourage them to feel good about themselves so that suicide doesn't become an issue.

Refer to the professional development training for the Health and Physical Education Curriculum.



*Bennett S, C Coggan and M Brewin (2003) Evidence for Student Focused School-based Suicide Prevention Programmes: Criteria for External Providers, *Centre Report Series No. 72*, University of Auckland: Injury Prevention Research Centre.

CRITERIA FOR SCHOOLS TO ASSESS EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND PROGRAMMES

This section outlines criteria for schools to assess the safety and value of school-based programmes. It is drawn from the report Evidence for Student Focused School-based Suicide Prevention Programmes.

This report was commissioned by the Ministries of Youth Affairs, Education and Health to provide evidence for considering suicide prevention programmes within a school setting. A copy of the report has been supplied to your school and is also available on the website www.youthaffairs.govt.nz

It is suggested that these criteria are used to inform the decision-makers as to whether or not a programme should be run within a school. The information required to answer the questions should be provided by the programme provider and should generate very little work for school staff.

It is further suggested that a copy of these criteria is provided to organisations or people wanting to work in the school for inclusion in their proposal or request.

Reading the report will provide important background details to the criteria. This will help in making the many assessments required.

Boards of Trustees may want to adopt these criteria as a policy guide to assess external organisations in relation to suicide prevention.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS FROM THE REPORT IN RELATION TO THE NEED FOR CRITERIA

- 🌀 Safety for students is paramount, which suggests a cautious approach.
- 🌀 Some programmes that aim to reduce suicidal behaviour among young people may have both positive outcomes for some students and unintended negative consequences for others.
- 🌀 Evaluation provides an important safety framework for schools and students.

THE CRITERIA FROM THE REPORT FOR CHOOSING AND ASSESSING EXTERNAL PROVIDERS

In order to meet the minimum standard of safety requirements, programme providers should be able to demonstrate that they are able to provide a **yes** response to each of the **essential** criteria.

The “gold standard” is that programmes also provide a **yes** response to each of the **essential** and **desirable** criteria.

It is suggested that you tick the **yes** boxes if the programme provider follows the safety criteria.

You could also hand a copy of the safety criteria to programme providers so that they can check that their programme meets the criteria.

Essential criteria for the safety of students

The programme provider ensures that:

- the programme does not directly or indirectly raise awareness around suicide yes
- the programme does not encourage young people to take a high degree of responsibility for the well-being of their peers yes
- programme providers have good, established and ongoing relationships with key people in the school and in the community, including school counselling services, youth mental health and crisis education services. yes

Desirable criteria for the safety of students

The programme provider ensures that:

- the programme content is appropriate for the age, gender and cultural background of your students yes
- parents, caregivers and whānau are informed that the programme is being provided yes
- the programme addresses issues of stigma associated with the identification of potentially high-risk students yes
- programme providers demonstrate to schools a clear understanding of the role of the external provider in the event of a suicide attempt, death or suicide cluster occurring within schools. yes

Essential criteria for programme consideration

The programme provider demonstrates that:

- the programme principles and content is congruent with *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* yes
- the programme has an appropriate and explicit theoretical or research base yes
- the programme, and programme outcomes, will be rigorously and independently evaluated. Also that the benefits of the programme will be substantiated by ongoing evaluation. yes

Desirable criteria for programme consideration

The programme provider demonstrates that:

- the programme principles and content are congruent with the aims and broad principles of the *New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy* yes



- there are minimal financial, time and opportunity costs for the school in implementing or administering the programme yes
- programme costs have no ethical implications for the school community yes
- the programme assists schools with implementing a whole school approach to mental health promotion. yes

Essential criteria for providers

Programme providers ensure that:

- they are able to document and demonstrate to schools that they have sufficient educational training and qualifications to demonstrate an understanding of the New Zealand curriculum. yes

Desirable criteria for providers

Programme providers ensure that they:

- provide to schools comprehensive information about their organisation, programme content and programme procedures yes
- are able to provide supportive documentation detailing their experience of working in schools in New Zealand yes
- are able to demonstrate to schools that the programme is sustainable in the long term, including the likelihood that the school will be able to ultimately incorporate the programme within school systems. yes

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT ON SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMES

This section summarises the key findings from the report Evidence for Student Focused School-based Suicide Prevention Programmes. If you are interested in the findings you can read the whole report that has been supplied to your school.



SCHOOLS PRESENT AN IDEAL SETTING FOR ENHANCING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The report found that schools can have a key role in suicide prevention because:

- 🌀 schools offer consistent, direct contact time with large populations of young people
- 🌀 schools with responsibility for the education and socialisation of young people have the potential to moderate the occurrence of risk behaviours and to identify and secure help for at-risk individuals
- 🌀 schools are in an optimum position to be involved in the primary prevention of suicide by implementing student focussed programmes that enhance mental health and well-being.

THE REPORT STUDIED THE EVIDENCE ON THREE TYPES OF SCHOOL-BASED SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAMMES

The three types of programmes:

- 🌀 universal classroom-based suicide prevention programmes
- 🌀 indicated programmes
- 🌀 whole school approaches.

1. Universal classroom-based suicide prevention programmes

Universal programmes are directed at an entire population rather than at selected groups or individuals. While universal classroom-based suicide prevention programmes vary considerably, some aim to:

- 🌀 increase students' awareness of suicidal behaviours
- 🌀 help students to identify warning signs of suicidal behaviours
- 🌀 provide students with information about mental health resources and how to access them
- 🌀 encourage suicidal young people to disclose their feelings and intentions to access appropriate help.

Findings from the report about universal programmes

- 🌀 Currently little evidence exists which supports providing students with universal classroom-based suicide prevention programmes.
- 🌀 The provision of universal classroom-based suicide specific prevention programmes directed at students is contentious.
- 🌀 There is generally strong support for education programmes about youth suicide prevention for teachers, allied school professionals and parents.
- 🌀 There may be beneficial and harmful effects of suicide prevention programmes on some students. The potential negative effects, especially among at-risk males, could have serious consequences.
- 🌀 General mental health issues should be incorporated into the school curricula, rather than teaching classroom-based programmes that focus specifically on suicide prevention.

2. Indicated programmes

Indicated programmes are those which directly target individuals who self-identify or who are identified by others as being vulnerable or at risk of emotional difficulties.

Findings from the report about indicated programmes

- Evaluation evidence on the effectiveness of indicated programmes is limited.
- However, evidence suggests that indicated programmes targeting high-risk young people in a school setting are most likely to be effective.
- Although not specifically focused on preventing suicide, indicated programmes can be effective in addressing risk factors that are strongly associated with suicidal behaviours among young people.

3. Whole school approaches

Whole school approaches means addressing issues at multiple levels. This approach is reflected in the *Health Promoting Schools* and *Mentally Healthy Schools* framework. This is where the school organisation, character, culture and curriculum, community links and partnerships are all connected to support and promote the mental health and well-being of all members of the school community.



Findings from the report about whole school approaches

- Positive mental health promotion programmes, which can be used as a component of a whole school approach, are likely to include components designed to:
 - increase awareness of mental health issues among students
 - destigmatise mental illness
 - encourage students to recognise mental health problems in themselves and their friends
 - facilitate processes for appropriate help seeking for students and their peers
 - teach self-awareness, coping skills, social skills and problem-solving skills.
- An important component of a whole school approach is the identification and referral of vulnerable young people to appropriate support.
- Schools are supported in these endeavours by the *Young People at Risk of Suicide* guidelines for the management of suicidal young people produced by the Ministry of Education.
- The guidance network concept, which includes the community, is a unique and powerful feature of New Zealand secondary schools. In terms of prevention, this is probably more effective than curriculum and structured programmes.
- Peer support models are frequently used by schools as one component of a whole school approach.
 - Suicidal young people are more likely to confide in a friend than an adult.
 - Peer support programmes have a range of roles for peers, ranging from listening, reporting warning signs of suicidal behaviour to counselling responsibilities.
 - It is of concern that the negative side effects of peer support programmes are rarely examined.
 - Caution is required in relation to the safety and efficacy of peer support programmes as they may increase the vulnerability of troubled young people.

- 🌀 There is strong theoretical justification for a whole school approach to positive mental health. In New Zealand and Australia promising results are emerging from a number of initiatives.
- 🌀 There is also strong evidence for supporting gatekeeper training (training of people who have responsibility for young people) and appropriate referral systems for suicidal young people.

Findings from the report on safety

All approaches to addressing suicide prevention in school settings are accompanied by a range of safety concerns and considerations.

- 🌀 Programmes need to have a sound theoretical orientation, which encourages rather than prevents young people from seeking assistance when it is required.
- 🌀 Safe and effective programmes must use proven implementation and instructional strategies delivered by trained professionals.
- 🌀 Consideration must be given to vulnerable young people.
- 🌀 Brief suicide prevention programmes with no connection to services should be avoided.
- 🌀 Strong links with community mental health services and other key agencies are essential.
- 🌀 There is support for programmes that provide longer term approaches and which teach positive mental health and well-being skills.
- 🌀 Programmes should be appropriate for the diverse cultural background of programme participants.
- 🌀 Evaluation provides an important safety framework for schools and participants.



WHERE TO GO FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

FOR SUPPORT FOLLOWING A SUICIDE OR OTHER TRAUMATIC INCIDENT

- Contact the Ministry of Education Group Special Education at your closest office and ask for the Traumatic Incident Co-ordinator. The Traumatic Incident Co-ordinator is available to support schools prepare for, and manage, a traumatic incident that impacts on the school community.

SUICIDE PREVENTION INFORMATION NEW ZEALAND (SPINZ)

SPINZ has been established to provide a broad range of research, information and resources on youth suicide prevention.

SPINZ is a national service co-hosted by the Mental Health Foundation and the Centre for Youth Health in South Auckland.

SPINZ can provide the following information:

- Four fact sheets:
 1. What is youth suicide prevention?
 2. A framework for understanding youth suicide prevention
 3. Preventing suicide - what makes a difference?
 4. Support after a suicide.
- The latest research articles on suicide prevention in relation to schools.
- The latest SPINZ and *New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy* newsletters.

SPINZ (Suicide Prevention Information New Zealand)

Web site: www.spinz.org.nz

Email: info@spinz.org.nz

Phone: 09 300 7035 (Auckland)
or 03 366 6910 (Christchurch)

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW ZEALAND YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGY - IN OUR HANDS / KIA PIKA TE ORA O TE TAITAMARIKI

- The Ministry of Youth Affairs can provide copies of the strategy.
- Government initiatives that support the strategy are available on the Youth Affairs website.
- The Youth Affairs website has a number of links to other websites with further information about youth suicide prevention.
- The report *Evidence for Student Focused School-based Suicide Prevention Programmes* is provided on the Youth Affairs website.

Ministry of Youth Affairs

Web site: www.youthaffairs.govt.nz

Email: info@youthaffairs.govt.nz

Phone: 04 471 2158

FOR INFORMATION ABOUT LOCAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

- Mental health promotion services can be located in the white pages of *The Telephone Book* under “Public Health Service” or the “Mental Health Foundation”.
- Local mental health services can be located through your local District Health Board in the front of *The Telephone Book* under “Hospitals and other health providers”.