



Brief Suicide Safety Assessment

Ask *Suicide-Screening* Questions

What to do when a pediatric patient screens positive for suicide risk:

- Use after a patient (8 - 24 years) screens positive for suicide risk on the asQ
- Assessment guide for mental health clinicians, MDs, NPs, or PAs
- Prompts help determine disposition

1 Praise patient *for discussing their thoughts*

“I’m here to follow up on your responses to the suicide risk screening questions. These are hard things to talk about. Thank you for telling us. I need to ask you a few more questions.”

2 Assess the patient *(If possible, assess patient alone depending on developmental considerations and parent willingness.)*

Review patient’s responses from the asQ

Frequency of suicidal thoughts

Determine if and how often the patient is having suicidal thoughts.

Ask the patient: “In the past few weeks, have you been thinking about killing yourself?” **If yes, ask:** “How often?” (once or twice a day, several times a day, a couple times a week, etc.) “When was the last time you had these thoughts?”

“Are you having thoughts of killing yourself right now?” **(If “yes,” patient requires an urgent/ STAT mental health evaluation and cannot be left alone. A positive response indicates imminent risk.)**

Suicide plan

Assess if the patient has a suicide plan, regardless of how they responded to any other questions (ask about method and access to means).

Ask the patient: “Do you have a plan to kill yourself?” **If yes, ask:** “What is your plan?” **If no plan, ask:** “If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?”

Note: *If the patient has a very detailed plan, this is more concerning* than if they haven’t thought it through in great detail. If the plan is feasible (e.g., if they are planning to use pills and have access to pills), this is a reason for greater concern and removing or securing dangerous items (medications, guns, ropes, etc.).

Past behavior

Evaluate past self-injury and history of suicide attempts (method, estimated date, intent).

Ask the patient: “Have you ever tried to hurt yourself?” “Have you ever tried to kill yourself?”

If yes, ask: “How? When? Why?” and assess intent: “Did you think [method] would kill you?” “Did you want to die?” (for youth, intent is as important as lethality of method) **Ask:** “Did you receive medical/psychiatric treatment?”

Note: *Past suicidal behavior is the strongest risk factor for future attempts.*

Symptoms *Ask the patient about:*

Depression: “In the past few weeks, have you felt so sad or depressed that it makes it hard to do the things you would like to do?”

Anxiety: “In the past few weeks, have you felt so worried that it makes it hard to do the things you would like to do or that you feel constantly agitated/on-edge?”

Impulsivity/Recklessness: “Do you often act without thinking?”

Hopelessness: “In the past few weeks, have you felt hopeless, like things would never get better?”

Anhedonia: “In the past few weeks, have you felt like you couldn’t enjoy the things that usually make you happy?”

Isolation: “Have you been keeping to yourself more than usual?”

Irritability: “In the past few weeks, have you been feeling more irritable or grouchier than usual?”

Substance and alcohol use: “In the past few weeks, have you used drugs or alcohol?” **If yes, ask:** “What? How much?”

Sleep pattern: “In the past few weeks, have you had trouble falling asleep or found yourself waking up in the middle of the night or earlier than usual in the morning?”

Appetite: “In the past few weeks, have you noticed changes in your appetite? Have you been less hungry or more hungry than usual?”

Other concerns: “Recently, have there been any concerning changes in how you are thinking or feeling?”

Social Support & Stressors

(For all questions below, if patient answers yes, ask them to describe.)

Support network: “Is there a trusted adult you can talk to? Who? Have you ever seen a therapist/counselor?” **If yes, ask:** “When?”

Family situation: “Are there any conflicts at home that are hard to handle?”

School functioning: “Do you ever feel so much pressure at school (academic or social) that you can’t take it anymore?”

Bullying: “Are you being bullied or picked on?”

Suicide contagion: “Do you know anyone who has killed themselves or tried to kill themselves?”

Reasons for living: “What are some of the reasons you would NOT kill yourself?”



Ask **Suicide-Screening** Questions**3 Interview patient & parent/guardian together**

If patient is ≥ 18 years, ask patient's permission for parent/guardian to join.

Say to the parent: "After speaking with your child, I have some concerns about his/her safety. We are glad your child spoke up as this can be a difficult topic to talk about. We would now like to get your perspective."

- "Your child said... (reference positive responses on the asQ). Is this something he/she shared with you?"
- "Does your child have a history of suicidal thoughts or behavior that you're aware of?" **If yes, say:** "Please explain."
- "Does your child seem:
 - o Sad or depressed?"
 - o Anxious?"
 - o Impulsive? Reckless?"
 - o Hopeless?"
 - o Irritable?"
 - o Unable to enjoy the things that usually bring him/her pleasure?"
 - o Withdrawn from friends or to be keeping to him/herself?"
- "Have you noticed changes in your child's:
 - o Sleeping pattern?"
 - o Appetite?"
- "Does your child use drugs or alcohol?"
- "Has anyone in your family/close friend network ever tried to kill themselves?"
- "How are potentially dangerous items stored in your home?" (e.g. guns, medications, poisons, etc.)
- "Does your child have a trusted adult they can talk to?" (Normalize that youth are often more comfortable talking to adults who are not their parents)
- "Are you comfortable keeping your child safe at home?"

At the end of the interview, ask the parent/guardian: "Is there anything you would like to tell me in private?"

4 Make a safety plan with the patient Include the parent/guardian, if possible.

Create a safety plan for managing potential future suicidal thoughts. A safety plan is different than making a "safety contract"; asking the patient to contract for safety is NOT effective and may be dangerous or give a false sense of security.

Say to patient: "Our first priority is keeping you safe. Let's work together to develop a safety plan for when you are having thoughts of suicide."

Examples: "I will tell my mom/coach/teacher."
"I will call the hotline." "I will call _____."

Discuss coping strategies to manage stress (such as journal writing, distraction, exercise, self-soothing techniques).

Discuss means restriction (securing or removing lethal means): "Research has shown that limiting access to dangerous objects saves lives. How will you secure or remove these potentially dangerous items (guns, medications, ropes, etc.)?"

Ask safety question: "Do you think you need help to keep yourself safe?" (A "no" response does not indicate that the patient is safe; but a "yes" is a reason to act immediately to ensure safety.)

5 Determine disposition

After completing the assessment, choose the appropriate disposition plan. *If possible, nurse should follow-up with a check-in phone call (within 48 hours) with all patients who screened positive.*

- Emergency psychiatric evaluation:** Patient is at imminent risk for suicide (current suicidal thoughts). Send to emergency department for extensive mental health evaluation (unless contact with a patient's current mental health provider is possible and alternative safety plan for imminent risk is established).
- Further evaluation of risk is necessary:** Review the safety plan and send home with a mental health referral as soon as patient can get an appointment (preferably within 72 hours).
- Patient might benefit from non-urgent mental health follow-up:** Review the safety plan and send home with a mental health referral.
- No further intervention is necessary at this time.**

For all positive screens, follow up with patient at next appointment.

6 Provide resources to all patients

- 24/7 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) En Español: 1-888-628-9454
- 24/7 Crisis Text Line: Text "HOME" to 741-741

