


Understanding and Preventing Child Suicide for Native Military Families



Bottom Line Up Front: This guide provides practical information to help you to start conversations with your child who may be experiencing suicidal thoughts or behaviors, and additional resources for immediate and longer-term assistance.



FOR IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE

Call **988**
or visit

www.militaryonesource.mil

Although military youth are raised in a culture of strength and resilience, military-connected youth are sometimes at risk for mental health difficulties, including suicidal thoughts and behaviors. In a 2014 study, youth with a deployed parent reported increased risk of feeling suicidal, sad, hopeless, or depressed.¹ Native military-connected youth may face additional challenges, such as being separated from their tribal community and culture, which can increase feelings of isolation. Separation from parents or siblings who are serving, worries about their safety, and feelings of anger, sadness, or unfairness about their deployment can lead to or worsen depression.



Culture is Prevention

Traditional cultural practices have sustained AI/AN peoples for centuries, and preserving and promoting culture is shown to improve mental health in Native communities.³

Traditional practices that can promote resilience and suicide prevention include:^{3,4}

- Participating in tribal ceremonies, such as sweat lodge (connect with nature and restore balance)
- Smudging/cleansing (improves spiritual well-being)
- Learning and practicing Native-inspired songs/dance
- Learning and practicing Native art and crafts
- Learning traditional plant medicine (natural healing practices)
- Participating in cultural counseling (such as talking circles)
- Sewing, beading, or other hobbies
- Harvesting
- Practicing body and good energy practices (improves physical, mental, and emotional well-being)
- Listening to and learning from elders (storytelling)

Native Storytelling Resources & Online Native Arts Classes

Supporting Military-Connected Youth in AI/AN Communities

nativecenter-ttsa.org

An activity booklet for Native military-connected youth to explore their resilience.

Perry Ground - Talking Turtle Stories

<https://www.facebook.com/TalkingTurtleStories>

Haudenosaunee storyteller who has serialized his stories on Facebook.

Chickasaw.tv - The Importance of Storytelling

<https://www.chickasaw.tv/playlists/the-importance-of-storytelling/videos/the-importance-of-storytelling>

How storytelling helps tribal members connect with their heritage and apply ancient lessons to modern life.

The Northwest Indian Storytellers Association (NISA)

<https://wisdomoftheelders.org/native-wisdom-documentary-film-series/>

More than 200 videos on a variety of topics, including Turtle Island Storytellers

(<https://wisdomoftheelders.org/turtle-island-storytellers/>).

Redhawk Native American Arts Council

<https://www.redhawkcouncil.org/online-native-arts-classes>

Native Arts Classes from basket weaving to beading, finger weaving and jewelry making.

PowWows.com

<https://www.powwows.com> › main › craft-tutorials

Craft tutorials ranging from Dream Catchers to Pow Wow Bustles.

Native Arts and Culture How to Videos

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_Ma9XTRSmHJwpPop22ZJHgNgBmKn3My

Protective factors against Native youth suicide attempts



- Strong cultural connections
- Positive family & friend relationships
- Community education about suicide
- Encouraging youth to talk to people they trust



What if you're away from your tribal community?

Being away from home is never easy, and separation from one's culture and community heritage is even tougher – especially for youth and adolescents who are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in the world. Separation from one or both parents via deployment or mobilizations, multiple moves and school changes, and other elements of military life can make the challenges of growing up even more difficult.

There are many things you can do to lessen the sense of separation and isolation from your culture:

1. Maintain regular contact with your extended family and tribal community (trusted elders, “aunties and uncles,” etc.) If virtual video options are available, consider scheduling regular sessions for the family to connect with those back home.
2. Check with your tribe to find resources on tribal history, stories, traditions, etc. Some tribes make digital resources available to members who don't live on tribal lands.
3. Make use of online resources when possible, such as Native storytelling or Native arts and crafts tutorials (see box to left for examples of some of these resources).
4. See if there are Native resources in your current community, such as an Urban Indian Center or other facility. These locations often have cultural activities like talking circles, youth groups, and other programs to build a sense of community among urban Natives.
5. Look for Native events like pow wows and cultural fairs in your area.
6. Keep up daily cultural practices at home, such as smudging and prayer.

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Childhood Trauma TSA, Category II

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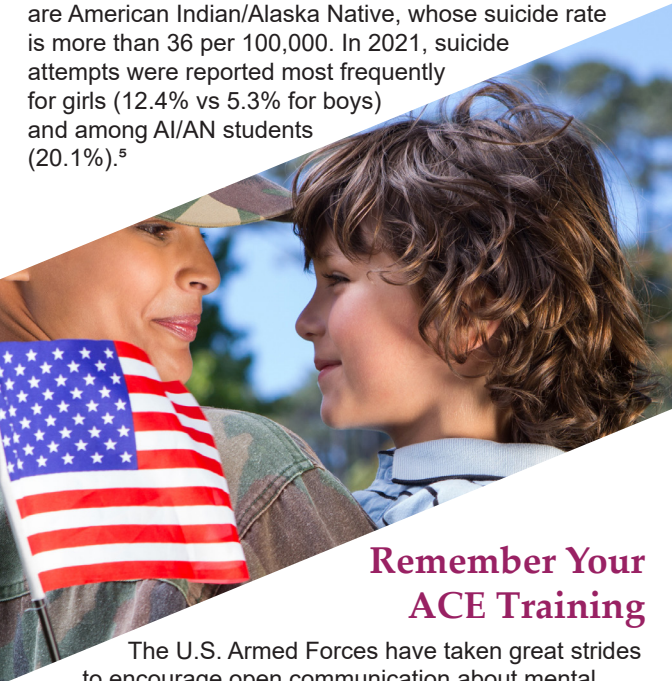
A PARTNER IN
NCTSN

The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network



Suicide and Military Youth

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the second leading cause of death for all youth aged 10–24 years. Of great concern, suicide rates for this age group grew by more than 50% between 2000 and 2021. The most impacted youths and young adults are American Indian/Alaska Native, whose suicide rate is more than 36 per 100,000. In 2021, suicide attempts were reported most frequently for girls (12.4% vs 5.3% for boys) and among AI/AN students (20.1%).⁵



Remember Your ACE Training

The U.S. Armed Forces have taken great strides to encourage open communication about mental health challenges and suicide. All branches have some form of ACE – **Ask, Care, Escort** – training for service members to use when they're concerned about a colleague. You can use this same approach with your family, regardless of age.

Ask

Have the courage and strength to ask the question directly: "Are you thinking of ending your life?" or "Are you thinking of suicide?"

Care

Actively listen to show understanding. Remain calm and focus on helping your child stay safe. Remove any means that could be used for self-injury.

Escort

Never leave your child alone. If you feel your child needs professional help, call **988**, the Military Health System Nurse Advice Line (**1-800-TRICARE**), or a local mental health service. If you don't know what services are available in your area, contact your child's pediatrician, local Military Treatment Facility, or www.militaryonesource.mil.

"Silence is dangerous when we pretend the problem is not there... Communication is a healer to break the silence."

~Canadian First Nations Elder

Talking with Your Child about Suicide

Children and youth who are feeling distress may think about suicide – especially if a friend or relative has attempted or died by suicide. Talking about suicide is difficult, and cultural considerations may make it more challenging. For example, some Native cultures believe that suicide and other harmful behaviors are caused by bad spirits, and they avoid talking about these things so they don't invite bad spirits into the home.

But talking is one of the key prevention factors when it comes to suicide. Children (and adults) who can talk openly about bad feelings are less likely to act on suicidal thoughts and more likely to get professional help when appropriate. In fact, talking about suicide can provide relief, connection and an opening to further conversations about whether or not they are experiencing suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

For tips on how to talk to a child about suicide based on age/cognitive development, check out ***Understanding Child Suicide: For Military Parents*** (<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/understanding-child-suicide-for-military-parents>).

To help encourage discussion about suicide:

- Choose a private place when you have plenty of time to talk.
- Listen nonjudgmentally, and ask open-ended questions to learn more about how your child is feeling and why.
- Recognize that they may downplay their feelings to avoid upsetting you.

Here are some ways to open the discussion:

- I want you to know you can tell me anything you are thinking or feeling.
- I really want to understand what you're going through, even if it raises difficult feelings for me.
- Talking about what you're feeling can help you feel better. You're not alone.
- I know you've been through some difficult experiences. I'd like to know more about how you feel about these things.
- If you ever feel like hurting or killing yourself, please let me know. We can work through it together.

Warning Signs that Your Child May be Suicidal

Remember to check in with your child regularly to find out how they're feeling. Children and youth who experience suicidal thoughts may not express those thoughts out loud. But there are some warning signs to look out for.



Indirect verbal cues

- "I'm going to hang it up."
- "No one would miss me."
- "I feel trapped."
- "People would be better off without me."
- Apologizing
- Saying goodbye



Behavior

- Prior suicidal behavior
- Withdrawing from favorite activities
- Isolating from friends and family – or wanting to spend more time with loved ones
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Increased alcohol/drug use
- Giving away possessions



Mood

- Symptoms of depression, hopelessness, or helplessness
- Shame
- Anxiety
- Agitation and/or anger
- Sudden cheerfulness (especially after a period of depression or hopelessness; may indicate they've decided to end their life)

If the answer is "Yes":

Ask if they've made a plan to end their life.

- Have you decided when you'll do it?
- Have you decided how you'll do it?
- Do you have what you need to do it?

If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes," get professional help immediately.

REMEMBER YOUR RESILIENCE

Military families – and Native people – are extremely resilient. As a parent or caregiver, you can help your child by encouraging discussions about difficult emotions and coming up with solutions together. Explain to your child that talking about issues is a show of strength and resilience. It can help them feel as if their problems are not too big to handle, and even if they do feel too big, you can work together to try to solve them.



*Adapted by Morgan Brooks, MA, and Meg Schneider from **Understanding Child Suicide: For Military Parents**. Tunno, A.M., Goldston, D., Adams, T., & Leskin, G. (2020). *Understanding child suicide: For military parents*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.*

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