

# Social withdrawal in kids, teens may signal higher suicide risk later: Study

January 26 2024, by Robin Foster

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If your preteen or teen skips school activities and social events, it may be

more than the typically moody behavior of adolescence, new research warns.

Being socially withdrawn and having physical discomforts such as headaches, nausea or stomachaches as a preteen may boost the risk of having [suicidal thoughts](#) by age 16, researchers report.

Dr. John Duffy, a Chicago-based psychologist who wasn't involved in the study, told CNN that the findings mirror what he has seen in his practice.

"That is, teenagers that I've worked with who are socially withdrawn and experienced somatic symptoms—*anxiety, in particular—early in adolescence have a far greater risk for suicidal ideation in mid and late adolescence,*" added Duffy. "This is undeniably true and a really strong argument for early intervention."

Duffy noted he has found the findings to be especially prevalent among boys and young men. "I think that's due in large part to the fact that girls are imbued early with a rich, emotional language that boys continue to lack even today," he said.

In the United States, [suicide attempts](#) and deaths by suicide among children and [young adults](#) have been increasing in recent years, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the new study, Japanese researchers studied over 2,700 adolescents involved in the Tokyo Teen Cohort study, which has examined mental and physical development during adolescence since 2012. Their parents answered questionnaires about their child's mental and behavioral symptoms at ages 10, 12 and 16.

Having suicidal thoughts was defined by answering "yes" or "somewhat

yes" to the question, "Do you currently think that you should not be alive?" at age 16.

Participants who experienced [social withdrawal](#) and [somatic symptoms](#) between the ages of 10 and 12 were roughly two to three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts at age 16, the study found.

The findings were [published](#) Jan. 25 in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

"As human beings, we are wired for social connection," said Dr. Christopher Willard, a teaching associate in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in Boston. "When it's neutral or positive, it lifts us up, it helps our mental health, it helps us have something to live for. It gives us perspective."

Social withdrawal by choice is typically more concerning than being withdrawn because of exclusion by other kids, Willard noted.

Lead study author Dr. Shuntaro Ando, an associate professor in the department of neuropsychiatry at the University of Tokyo, told CNN that parents shouldn't assume "that the withdrawn symptoms are not a problem because the child has always been shy and prefers to be alone."

When it comes to whether your child is suicidal, keep an eye out for symptoms such as extreme mood swings, hopelessness, the giving away of cherished belongings or an obsession with death.

Seeking professional help early as a preventive approach is important, Duffy said.

And while help from [mental health](#) professionals can be critical, don't underestimate the power of your child finding a good friend in a kind peer, sports coach or family friend, Willard said.

**More information:** If your teen is experiencing suicidal thoughts, the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) number is available to call or text 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has more about [teen suicide](#).

Akito Uno et al, Suicidal Thoughts and Trajectories of Psychopathological and Behavioral Symptoms in Adolescence, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.53166](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.53166)

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