

# The Risks of Suicide Among Australian Kids asks the question - Why is Major Depression increasing among young Australians?

By Karen Phillip, Author of “Who Runs Your House, the kids or you?”

There are approximately 8,000 suicides in Australia each year and mental health experts fear this figure shows no sign of diminishing.

The rate of depression in Australian children is growing at an alarming rate, with children as young as 5 years old being diagnosed with major depression. And things only get worse as they get older with the occurrence of major depression increasing among children aged between 15 – 24 years. Sadly, with increased depression amongst this age group comes increased rate of suicide.

Experts agree that one of the main reasons for these escalating figures is linked to increased conflict within the home - conflict between the parents, as well as conflict between the parent and child.

“Parents must be accountable and learn better ways of communicating with each other and their children,” explains leading family therapist and regular media commentator, Karen Phillip.

“When children are in an environment where there is conflict – even subtle, non-physical conflict - they are more likely to retreat within and blame themselves for the conflict around them. It’s this ‘going inwards’ that is at the heart of depression in our kids and the leading cause of suicide amongst them.”

In a recent study undertaken by Woman and Children’s Health Network, it was revealed:

- 4 in a 100 pre-schoolers (4%) have some symptoms of depression
- 10 in a 100 (10%) children between the ages of 6 and 12 have persistent feelings of sadness which can last for a few weeks or months.
- 2 in a 100 (2%) children become seriously depressed.
- The rate goes up with age, so that about 5 in a 100 (5%) young people (over 12 years) suffer a major depressive illness which lasts for a few weeks or months at some time

Before puberty, the rates of depression in girls and boys are about the same, but after puberty more girls than boys experience depression. ([www.cyh.com/healthtopics](http://www.cyh.com/healthtopics)) These figures are alarming!

Parenting is most certainly a hard job, it is a tiresome 24/7 job every day, week and month. Many of us simply get into a routine of anger or conflict with our partner or children and the conflict just continue. This is often because we do not know how to change it or what it is we can do differently to improve it.

We do not seem to believe that giving in will resolve the issue because the other person will win, so we stand firm and continue to yell, argue, blame or ignore. This does not resolve the issue and most of the time the issue will re-present itself again and again and the conflict continues.

So let's start being responsible parents. Learn the right communication skills to remove this escalating conflict. You need to protect the most vulnerable people in society, your children. Surely the effort is worth it.

### **Parental Conflict: How it Harms our Children**

The wish that most all of our children have is that their parents do not argue or fight with each other. When children are young they do not know how to resolve issues, they learn these skills from their parents, their role models. The problem so many of our children are experiencing is ongoing parental conflict and this includes conflict between parents living together or separated.

While it is normal for two adult people to have different opinions it is vital that parents learn a way of communicating to resolve their differences. We need to demonstrate to our children it is alright to have a different opinion from another person but it is not alright to bully them into thinking, acting or behaving in the way we demand the other adult behaves. This is what often causes the conflict – it's my way because I am right and you are wrong.

It is vital for parents to learn how to respectfully communicate, it is absolutely essential. Australia has a very high incidence of youth suicide. Children between the ages of 15 – 24 years are being diagnosed with depression and suiciding at an alarmingly high rate each year and we are now experiencing children as young as 5 years old being diagnosed with major depression. Statistics show that one in five teens have experienced depression. The primary cause of this suicide rate and depression in our children is said to be parental conflict. Conflict between the parents and conflict between the child and parent.

### **The message this is teaching our children is**

1. Conflict is normal, arguing is normal, yelling is how we try to get another person to hear us. All of course is crazy and wrong.
2. It teaches them that this is how grown up adults resolve issues by yelling, screaming and abusing the other person.
3. It sets the foundation of how a child learns how to get along with another person

4. It demonstrates often that bullying another person is acceptable. When a larger or louder person becomes animated or aggressive, you win.
5. The longer conflict continues at home, the greater the likelihood that psychological damage will result and children may experience and display behaviour problems, anxiety, depression, aggression, sleep problems, low self-esteem and learning problems at school.
6. Children learn that hostility is normal

### **What can we do better and how can we protect our children?**

1. Parents are grown up adults and need to learn different and better ways to communicate. If they never received this opportunity when growing up their behaviours are simply going to continue generation to generation.
2. Take an anger management course, speak with a Counsellor to find better ways to communicate, learn to accept and respect the person with whom you have chosen to share your life.
3. Remember that every word and action you display is seen, heard and felt by your child.
4. You can tell your child that you and their other parent are cross at the moment but, you are trying to sort it out. A child can feel very threatened and unsafe if they think a parent may leave.
5. Keep an eye on your child to ensure they are not starting down the depression scale; get immediate help from a trained professional or school counsellor. It is easier to step in early than to try to correct damage that has been there for a long while. Talk to them, comfort them, reassure them.
6. We can get so wrapped up in our own heads and events we can sometimes neglect the most vulnerable person in our lives, our child. Take time for yourself and them.

### **How to avoid hurting your Child**

1. Never use your child as a sounding board for your frustration. Remember – there is parent business and child business, they do not overlap.
2. Never denigrate or demean the other parent to your child; this is hurtful to them at a very intense level.

3. Your child is not your friend, they are your child so confide in an adult family member or friend, but never your child.
4. Always remind your child that mum and dad may be cross but they still both love you and love spending time with you.
5. When undertaking family activities, remove the digs and insults toward the other parent. This simply displays childish behaviour – you should be smarter than that.