

Means Matter

At Children's Mercy we are very aware that the needs of our community are huge, and we want to reach more families. We know parenting is the hardest job in the world, and we want parents to feel empowered to create a safe home environment.

Medications in our homes contribute greatly to the substance abuse we see in teens, but also the suicide attempts by overdose. Out of the hundreds of teens I have interviewed after a suicide attempt, almost all used medication they found easily at home. Getting rid of medication that we no longer need is a critical step. Many parents tell me that they locked up the opiates but never thought about how Tylenol, Benadryl or Ibuprofen could be dangerous. One of the worst outcomes I have seen was after a teen ingested a handful of allergy medication. I tell parents that no teen should ever have access to a handful of *any* medication. Dispose of old medication that you no longer need, and lock up the large bottles in a tackle box or filing cabinet. Leaving a small pill box unlocked is a way to reduce access to medication, and it also helps people remember to take it routinely. The FDA has a website that addresses ways to dispose of medication safely. One option is to mix it with kitty litter or coffee grounds and seal it in a plastic bag that goes into the trash.

My father enjoys hunting, so I grew up with the knowledge that firearm ownership is common in our community. In my work I have found that it can be a difficult topic to discuss. But I have that conversation, telling parents that I never want to look back and wish I had. Quick access to firearms, particularly when a teen is feeling desperate, can be a lethal combination. Most teens that end their lives with a firearm use one owned by a family member. Teens tend to be very impulsive, and they often struggle to see that life will get better. As adults we know they can survive this awful situation, but often they can't imagine it. Storing guns locked, unloaded, with the ammunition locked separately is the best scenario if you have firearms in your home.

Many parents tell me that they can't imagine their son or daughter becoming suicidal. Given what I have seen, I think about it like a car accident. If you drove in a vehicle this morning, did you expect you would get into a wreck? Most of us don't. But most of us put on that seatbelt: *just in case*. I'm convinced that limiting access to methods used in suicides could make a huge difference in our community, particularly with teens who are impulsive. Many countries have experienced a big decrease in suicides just by employing this technique: limiting access to the methods used in suicide. The person who is struggling often does not want to die, but they want to end suffering, or escape the situation. Limiting access to means increases the chances for a full recovery.

This is a very difficult topic to broach, as suicide is a painful and complicated issue. There is no simple solution that will prevent all suicides. One step we can all take towards prevention, however, is means restriction. Please share this information with other parents—and never be afraid to speak up if you are worried about someone.

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FDA info on disposing of medications:

<https://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm101653.htm>

Harvard website on limiting access to suicidal means:

<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>

Israeli example of lowered suicide rate:

<https://disastermilitarymedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40696-015-0007-y>