

When a kid shuts down

With teenage suicide rates being discussed widely in the media, many anxious parents will be asking themselves how they can minimise the risk of adolescent suicide for their own sons and daughters.

It would be a kneejerk reaction suddenly to ban your teenagers from all their computer activities, but one of the protective factors you can put in place is to make sure your child is not using a computer or a television in their bedroom all the time.

Ideally, computers are best in a room where there is interaction with other people so the chance for isolation with this powerful machine is limited.

In fact, kids isolating themselves is often a warning sign that all is not right in their lives, and can be a sign of depression creeping in.

Of course, some kids just have temperaments that are a bit grumpy and unhappy, and adolescence magnifies this. But these kids will tend to be vocal about their feelings, and that can be a protective factor.

The worry comes when a normally confident and communicative teenager suddenly changes to an isolated one who stops socialising and wants to be alone.

As with many things in life, it's the change in behaviour that is a warning sign, rather than the behaviour alone.

So how do you stay engaged with your kids and try to tap into what is happening in their lives? Don't ever complain about being a taxi driver for them, even if they are being rude or obnoxious. And withdrawing the service is a good way to show them a consequence for their actions.

The bigger picture is that it's often while you are doing your unpaid taxi-driver stint that you hear about what is happening in their lives.

If you have noticed negative changes in your teenager's normal behaviour, the first avenue to check is their school co-ordinator or counsellor, to see if you can get a picture from that end.

If you are having trouble connecting with your teenager, try to get someone else in the family to do it and find out what's really happening.

If you feel totally at sea, seek help from organisations such as Relationships Australia or the Victorian Parenting Centre.

Even a one-off session with someone experienced in this area can give you some strategies for survival.

Survival tips

- **Be on the lookout for any negative behavioural changes in teenagers that involve isolation**
- **If you feel overwhelmed trying to cope with a teen, get help from Relationships Australia, ph: 1300 364 277, or the Victorian Parenting Centre, ph: 8660 3500**
- **Make sure teenagers know the 24-hour Kids Helpline number – 1800 551 800.**