

Suicide Intervention and Schools:
Reflections and Directions
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International Symposium Raises Concerns About Youth Suicide

- Alarming increases but statistics are questioned
- Media sensationalism of suicide
- Clusters of suicides occur
- Schools are the best place to intervene
- Students are under extreme pressure
- Guns are too available

2009 YRBSS RESULTS

- Surveyed 15,000 H.S students and in the last year
- 26.1 % reported being sad or hopeless
- 10.9% made a suicide plan
- 6.3% made an attempt

Best Practices

- Schools are encouraged to form a suicide prevention task force to review the incidence and to develop policies and procedures and prevention programs
- The task force will be the most effective when community mental health, law enforcement, medical personnel, survivor groups and clergy are represented

GLS Training Feb. 2011: Key Points

- Suicidal youth are less connected to adults and have fewer friends and their friends are more positive about suicide as a solution
- Prevention must focus on increasing connections to adults and enhancing protective factors and training peer leaders from diverse groups as they are the key to reducing the “code of silence”

U.S. Preventative Task Force 2009

- Routine screening recommended for all teens 12 to 18
- Major depression often goes undiagnosed and untreated
- Begin with a questionnaire that teens can fill out in private
- Screening should be repeated even if “no red flags”
- Teens at risk should get full diagnostic work up

Best Practices for Schools

- Awareness training on warning signs for all staff
- Suicide lethality assessment training for key staff
- Policies and guidelines for parent notification and supervision and support services for suicidal students
- Referral procedures for community services and monitoring and follow up at school

American Association of Suicidology: School Suicide Prevention Accreditation Program

- Designed for support and mental health professionals
- Become your school/community authority
- Know best/evidence based practices
- Reading list and sample exam provided
- Includes membership and ongoing support
- www.suicidology.org

Best Practices

- Keep up with prevention literature and current trends such as the fact that hanging deaths have increased for middle school age youth
- Implement depression screening programs such as SOS and Teenscreen which research studies have found effective and these programs are recommended by many professional associations

Evidenced Based Screening Programs: Suicide Prevention Resource Center

- Signs of Suicide SOS

www.mentalhealthscreening.org

- Teenscreen

www.teenscreen.org

GLBT Issues

- Higher rates for youth not due to identity but unique complications “nothing inherently suicidal about same sex orientation”
- Studies have found 17 to 42% more attempts
- External factors: conflict, harassment, abuse rejection, lack of support
- Advocacy for GLBT population in school often met with resistance

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

World Health Organization

- Family cohesion and stability
- Coping and problem solving skills
- Positive self worth and impulse control
- Positive connections to school and extracurricular participation
- Successful academically

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Good relationships with other youth
- Seeks adult help when needed
- Lack of access to suicidal means
- Access to mental health care
- Religiosity
- School environment that encourages help seeking and promotes health

Landmark Cases

- Wyke vs. Polk County School Board 11th Federal Circuit Court 1997 found the district liable for not offering a suicide prevention program, providing inadequate supervision of a suicidal student and failing to notify parents when their child was suicidal

Landmark Cases

- Szostek vs. Fowler and the Cypress-Fairbanks School District 189th District Court 1993 found the school had not negligently disciplined the student who died by suicide and were entitled to sovereign immunity. This case does highlight school discipline has been a common precipitating event for suicide and raises questions as to how to discipline with sensitivity to the possibility of suicide.

Prevention and Mental Health

- **Mares vs. Shawnee Mission Schools**
Johnson County District Court 2007 the school system settled out of court after being sued following the suicides of two brothers. Key issues in the case was failure to implement suicide postvention procedures after the first death.

Bullying and Suicide

- Latest term is “bullicide” as a number of parents have sued schools claiming that their child's death by suicide was the result of the school’s failure to stop the bullying
- Jasperson vs. the Anoka-Hennepin ISD 2006 was one such case as the parents blamed bullying at school for the suicide of their child. The court found in favor of the school system in summary judgment

After a Suicide

- Why did he/she do it?
- What method did they use?
- Why didn't God stop them?
- Is someone or something to blame?
- How do we prevent further suicides?

Suicide Clusters:

Factors and Issues

- May often go unnoticed or unreported
- Search for risk factors in communities
- Every community is vulnerable
- Media reporting and dosage of exposure are key factors
- Teens vulnerability due to modeling and impulsivity
- Reducing access to lethal means and creating barriers to suicide reduces contagion

Kaukauna Cluster Intervention

- Kaukauna, Wisconsin H.S. from fall 2009 to spring 2011, five students and two recent graduates died by suicide
- Risk factors for imitation
- Connect the Community formed with six subcommittees
- My involvement in consultation, training and presentations for parents

AFSP and SPRC Postvention Toolkit Released April 2011

- Schools should strive to treat all deaths the same (to reduce suicide stigma)
- Be aware of copy cat dangers and stress the victim was likely struggling with mental health issues
- Emphasize help is available
- Monitor social networking sites

Toolkit Recommendations for Memorials

- Prohibiting all memorials is problematic
- Recognize the challenge to strike a balance between needs of distraught students and fulfilling the primary purpose of education
- Meet with students and be creative and compassionate
- Spontaneous memorials should be left in place until after the funeral
- Avoid holding services on school grounds

Postvention

- The journey begins and ends with prevention and no single agency or entity can stop a suicide cluster as it take the entire community working together!

YOUTH SUICIDE: Resources

American Association of Suicidology

www.suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

www.afsp.org

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

www.sprc.org

Suicide Prevention Is Everyone's Responsibility

- **For more information:**

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