

Information Dissemination in Schools

Suicide was the third leading cause of death in 2000 among 10–14 year olds and 15–19 year olds in the United States (3). In 2002, researchers found that one in five teenagers in the United States seriously considers suicide, which translates into slightly over one million teenagers. (28)

School-based prevention programs for suicide are ideal because the school provides an environment with the highest likelihood of exposure to a prevention program for adolescents (5). Despite a surge in attention, facilitated partly by the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide (1999), school-based suicide prevention programs by in large have lacked commitment after implementation.

When schools cease to attend to suicide prevention programs, the facts surrounding suicide fail to be communicated to faculty, staff, and students. If this happens a true understanding about adolescent suicide becomes clouded by false myths and presumptuous ideas, which surround the topic of suicide and act as a barrier for suicide prevention programs.

School-based suicide prevention efforts should be facilitated by knowledgeable staff and should make knowledge available to all staff within the school setting (1,2,3,7). Research has shown that teachers are inadequately trained on issues surrounding adolescent suicide and that most schools do not have a training program in place (6,10).

One study found that teachers who are most likely to have some training or have addressed suicide in their curriculum (health teachers) did not feel confident that they could identify a student at-risk for suicide; only about one in ten (9%) felt confident about identifying a student at-risk (11). This lack of training and apparent lack of confidence is troubling when considering that results from a study found that over 25% of teachers who were surveyed about adolescent suicide reported that they had been approached by teens who were at-risk for suicide (12).

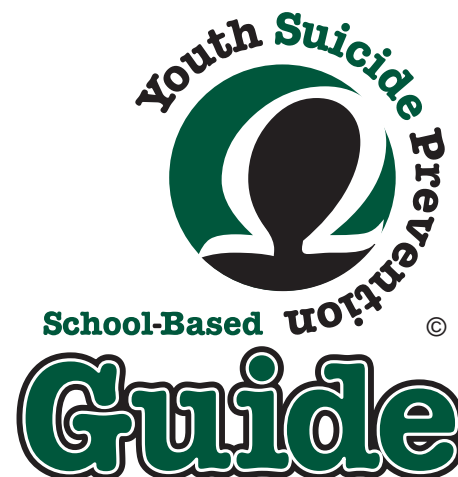
Training faculty and staff is universally advocated and supported by research as an essential and effective component to a suicide prevention program (18,19,20,21,22,23,24). Research suggests that

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Issue Brief



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training faculty and staff to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to identify students who may be at-risk for suicide and make referrals when necessary can produce positive effects on an educator's knowledge, attitude, and referral practices (2,24,25,26,27).

Training has also been found to increase educators' confidence that they have the ability to recognize a potentially suicidal student by more than four times that of teachers who don't receive training (13).

It is essential that administrators disseminate current information about adolescent suicide, such as risk factors, referral practices, and what to do when faced with a student potentially at-risk for suicide, to all staff generally in a convenient location for helping troubled teens.

Similar information should be presented to parents, which studies have shown is an essential component of suicide prevention programs (13,14). It is also important that information provided to parents include a brief discussion about how to limit access to the tools used for suicide, such as gun restriction strategies (3,14,15,16). Research has found that a brief one hour and thirty minute presentation should be sufficient for educating parents about adolescent suicide (14). This presentation should be part of a more comprehensive presentation that may address other issues such as gun restriction strategies or adolescent substance abuse (14). It is essential that parents have access to individuals within the school or information provided to them by the school about adolescent suicide.

Providing educators with the facts does not have to be an exhausting, time-consuming process. Research (2,5) has shown that one brief, two-hour program produced substantial gains in teachers' awareness of adolescent suicide.

Research (9) also found that the New Jersey Adolescent Suicide Prevention Project, which offered a two-hour educator training program, resulted in an increased awareness in teachers' ability to identify at-risk students, as well as increasing the number of referrals teachers made to mental health professionals. A Colorado school-based suicide prevention program that focused on professional training about adolescent suicide resulted in a larger

number of referrals and an overall increase in school staff's knowledge about adolescent suicide (1).

Educating faculty and staff in a brief one-shot approach is efficient and more importantly does not lead to any harmful results.

One concern by overwhelmed teachers is that such an information sharing session would be just one more responsibility that they must address and take the burden of action for...however, the Centers for Disease Control (1) found that teachers respond to and receive suicide prevention programs and in-services in a positive and welcoming manner.

Research suggests that teachers believe that they have a large role in identifying students at risk for suicide; that if they did identify students at risk, it would reduce their likelihood of committing suicide; and that one of the most important things that a teacher could ever do is to prevent a suicide (5,8). Given the potential impact teachers can have on adolescent suicide and given their apparent response to these programs, it seems prudent that a school should confront suicide and challenge the myths surrounding adolescent suicide.

Only through dedicated administrators, who are willing to disseminate this information about suicide, will teachers be able to effectively combat adolescent suicide. Research has shown that principals have also expressed that in-service training programs are an acceptable method for educating staff about adolescent suicide (14,17). As mentioned previously, evidence has shown that a brief two-hour in-service is an adequate method for increasing teachers' knowledge...however, small group discussion sessions that allow educators to share their attitudes and concerns about adolescent suicide have also been shown to be effective ways of establishing a sense of cohesion between staff as well as increasing a teacher's confidence in addressing suicide (2).

How a school chooses to disseminate information to educators should be determined by each school in a way that conforms to the attitude of the school as well as the wishes and concerns of the staff. Only in this way will educators and administrators implement and maintain such potentially life-saving, information-sharing sessions.

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continued

Barriers that have consistently stymied suicide prevention programs from being effectively implemented and maintained include the large and pervasive number of myths that surround adolescent suicide. It is of utmost importance that school staff and administrators be given the truth about adolescent suicide and that the myths surrounding suicide be dispelled.

The chart on page six is meant to inform staff in a succinct way about some of the myths that surround adolescent suicide. These myths have created fear in parents, school staff, and the general public and have led many to feel apprehensive about suicide prevention programs in schools...however, research has demonstrated that these myths are just that, myths — grounded not in reality, but in distorted perceptions of reality.

This chart seeks to falsify myths by substituting evidence-based statements designed through research findings for sensationalized conjecture designed through fear and misunderstanding. In doing so, this chart hopefully will enhance confidence and willingness to address suicide prevention in an appropriate manner.

This chart should be provided to staff and parents as part of an in-service or parent-teacher meeting, at which adolescent suicide prevention is discussed. Not included in this issue brief, but found as a stand-alone document in the left hand side of the folder is a concise true and false test on myths (Checklist 1t), which should be presented to staff as well as parents as a way of increasing their awareness and knowledge about adolescent suicide. By simply giving this true and false test to staff and parents and allowing for some time to discuss questions and concerns, schools can effectively increase awareness about adolescent suicide and may help prevent an incident of suicide in their school.

Although numerous studies have mentioned myths surrounding adolescent suicide as barriers for implementing and maintaining suicide prevention programs, there are two that make myths a focus of the research (4,7). Please refer to The Guide's Annotated Bibliography for an annotated description of both of these studies.

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Myths and Current Facts About Adolescent Suicide

Myths	Evidence-Based Facts
Adolescent suicide is a decreasing problem in the United States.	While the suicide rate for the general population has remained relatively stable since the 1950s, the suicide rate for adolescents has more than tripled (1). Presently, the suicide rate for 15–19 year olds stands at 11 per 100,000 (2). From 1980 to 1992, the suicide rate for 15–19 year olds and 10–14 year olds increased 28% and 120% (1).
Most teenagers will not reveal that they are suicidal or have emotional problems for which they would like emotional help.	Most teens will reveal that they are suicidal. Although studies have shown that they are more willing to discuss suicidal thoughts with a peer than a school staff member (3), this disposition that most teens have towards expressing suicidal ideations could be used for screening adolescents through questionnaires and/or interviews (4).
African-American teens do not commit suicide.	African-Americans do commit suicide and the numbers of suicides reported for this group has increased at an alarming rate. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports a 114% increase in suicides among black males aged 10–19 from 1980 to 1995, a rate higher than that of any other group. Among black males aged 10–14 during the same period, the suicide increase was 233%, compared with 120% for white males in the same age group (5). For black males aged 15–19, the suicide rate rose 146%, compared with 22% for white males (5).
Adolescents who talk about suicide do not attempt or commit suicide.	One of the most ominous warning signs of adolescent suicide is talking repeatedly about one’s own death (3). Adolescents who make threats of suicide should be taken seriously and provided the help that they need (6).
Educating teens about suicide leads to increased suicide attempts, since it provides them with ideas and methods about killing themselves.	When issues concerning suicide are taught in a sensitive educational context they do not lead to, or cause, further suicidal behaviors (7). Since three-fourths (77%) of teenage students state that if they were contemplating suicide they would first turn to a friend for help, peer assistance programs have been implemented throughout the nation (1). These educational programs help students to identify peers at risk and help them receive the help they need. Such programs have been associated with increased student knowledge about suicide warning signs and how to contact a hotline or crisis center, as well as increased likelihood to refer other students at risk to school counselors and mental health professionals (8,9,14). Directly asking an adolescent if he or she is thinking about suicide displays care and concern and may aid in clearly determining whether or not an adolescent is considering suicide. Research shows that when issues concerning suicide are taught in a sensitive and educational manner, students demonstrate significant gains in knowledge about the warning signs of suicide and develop more positive attitudes toward help-seeking behaviors with troubled teens (8,11).

Myths and Current Facts About Adolescent Suicide

continued

Myths	Evidence-Based Facts
Talking about suicide in the classroom will promote suicidal ideas and suicidal behavior.	Talking about suicide in the classroom provides adolescents with an avenue to talk about their feelings, thereby enabling them to be more comfortable with expressing suicidal thoughts and increasing their chances of seeking help from a friend or school staff member (3).
Parents are often aware of their child's suicidal behavior.	Studies have shown that as much as 86% of parents were unaware of their child's suicidal behavior (3). When compared to control subjects, adolescent suicide victims were found to have had significantly less frequent and less satisfying communication with their parents (1).
Most adolescents who attempt suicide fully intend to die.	Most suicidal adolescents do not want suicide to happen (10). Rather, they are torn between wanting to end their psychological pain through death and wanting to continue living, though only in a more hopeful environment. Such ambivalence is communicated to others through verbal statements and behavior changes in 80% of suicidal youths (1).
There is not a significant difference between male and female adolescents regarding suicidal behavior.	Adolescent females are significantly more likely than adolescent males to have thought about suicide and to have attempted suicide (1,3,4,7). More specifically, adolescent females are 1.5 to 2 times more likely than adolescent males to report experiencing suicidal ideation and 3 to 4 times more likely to attempt suicide (1). Adolescent males are 4 to 5.5 times more likely than adolescent females to complete a suicide attempt (12). While adolescent females complete one out of 25 suicide attempts, adolescent males complete one out of every three attempts (1).
The most common method for adolescent suicide completion is drug overdose.	Guns are the most frequently used method for completing suicides among adolescents (3,12,13.). In 1994, guns accounted for 67% of all completed adolescent suicides while strangulation (via hanging), the second most frequently used method for adolescent suicide completions, accounted for 18% of all completed adolescent suicides (1). Having a gun in the house increases an adolescent's risk of suicide (15,22). Regardless of whether a gun is locked up or not, its presence in the home is associated with a higher risk for adolescent suicide. This is true even after controlling for most psychiatric variables. Homes with guns are 4.8 times more likely to experience a suicide of a resident than homes without guns (1). In lieu of these findings, it should not be surprising that restricting access to handguns has been found to significantly decrease suicide rates among 15–24 year olds (1,15).
Because female adolescents complete suicide at a lower rate than male adolescents, their attempts should not be taken seriously.	One of the most powerful predictors of completed suicide is a prior suicide attempt (1,3,4,12,15,16-22). Adolescents who have attempted suicide are 8 times more likely than adolescents who have not attempted suicide to attempt suicide again (1). One-third to one-half of adolescents who kill themselves have a history of a previous suicide attempt. Therefore, all suicide attempts should be treated seriously, regardless of sex of the attempter.

Myths and Current Facts About Adolescent Suicide

continued

Myths	Evidence-Based Facts
Suicidal behavior is inherited.	There is no specific suicide gene that has ever been identified in determining or contributing to the expression of suicide (1,12,20,21,22).
Adolescent suicide occurs only among poor adolescents.	Adolescent suicide occurs in all socioeconomic groups (15,16,21). Socioeconomic variables have not been found to be reliable predictors of adolescent suicidal behavior (1,3,15,16,21). Instead of assessing adolescents' socioeconomic backgrounds, school professionals should assess their social and emotional characteristics (i.e., affect, mood, social involvement, etc.) to determine if they are at increased risk.
The only one who can help a suicidal adolescent is a counselor or a mental health professional.	Most adolescents who are contemplating suicide are not presently seeing a mental health professional (7). Rather, most are likely to approach a family member, peer, or school professional for help. Displaying concern and care as well as ensuring that the adolescent is referred to a mental health professional are ways paraprofessionals can help.

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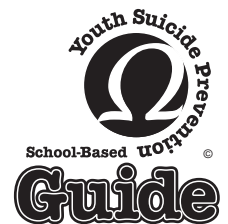
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Notes

Notes



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