

Family Partnerships

Fact or Myth?

“Parents are often aware of their child’s suicidal behavior.”

Answer: This is a Myth. Parents are usually not aware of their child’s suicidal behavior.

Parents are often struggling just to learn how to raise their children, and find it very difficult to understand the emotional journeys their children are going through. Parents seem to be more equipped to understand the issues of a high fever, spots on the skin or broken bones. But, when it comes to unusual behavior, they are at a loss. In fact, studies have shown that as many as 86% of parents were unaware of their child’s suicidal behavior.

With all that is happening at the schools, it is difficult for teachers to be aware of and respond to the different crises that the students bring. Very often, teachers see some of the difficult behaviors, while the parents are the last to know. The parents may feel that the social stigma of mental crisis and challenges are “not what happens to my child”. Mental health problems or suicide happens to someone else’s child. When there is a behavioral problem, often there is not an easy answer or a place to turn. There are few places or answers. There are few discussions that take place regarding these issues. There are few support groups that are available. Where do we turn?

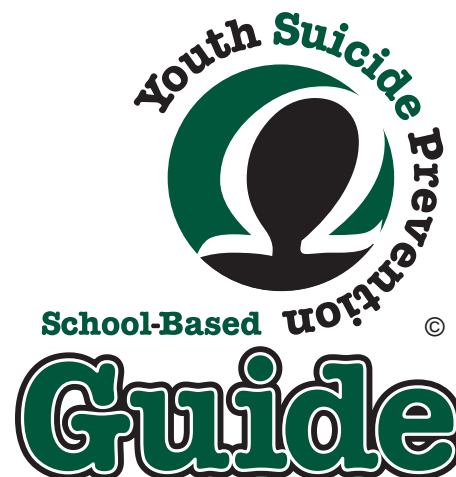
Many teachers fear discussions of suicide being raised in schools due to the perceived risk that it might trigger suicidal behavior among the students. However, research has shown this not to be true. What is the liability of the school and the teacher? What is the downside of not educating those within the school and, more importantly, the family? Sometimes it is difficult to get parents involved in regular school activities such as PTAs. Today, the percentage of parents who are involved in the student’s activities is very small. Often, parents of students who have issues, including traumas of sexual, emotional or physical abuses, are not available.

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8

Issue Brief



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Family Partnerships continued

The importance of educating the family is highlighted by a recent study of the Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance Survey 2001. Students in the U.S. replied yes to the following questions:

- Have you seriously considered suicide? 19.0%
- Have you attempted suicide? 8.8%
- Have you attempted suicide that required medical attention? 2.6%

It is very important to present the facts and information to the family. But how do we involve them when there is a lack of commitment on a regular basis?

An effort must start by educating all concerned. It starts with the School Board, then to each school in the district to include middle and high school. A crisis plan must be in place for the school district. Guidance counselors at each school must be well educated in suicidality and its signs. A developed program to educate the faculty and staff at each school is a must. This would include warning signs and risk factors and what to and not to do when confronted with a student in crisis. (See Issue Briefs 3a, 3b, and 6c) Suicide prevention education could take place in the Life Skills Management classes for Florida students. Some schools may produce a school-wide suicide prevention program.

But, the most important aspect is trying to reach out and inform the family. The following are some ideas to involve parents and families (Also see Issue Brief 9: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations):

- Present to the school's Parent-Teacher Association or School Advisory Council,
- Print articles to parents in the school's newsletter and develop handouts in parent's native language emphasizing the importance of parental involvement,
- Schools usually have a working relationship with the local newspapers for school news, so provide educational information to the media,
- Provide articles to the local newspapers for general stories on suicide prevention,
- Schedule a parent workshop night to discuss students' changing behaviors,

- Reach out to faith-based communities (where parents are involved) to offer educational programs,
- Offer after-school programs or support groups where parents can join with students for peer and family counseling,
- Contact local survivor or suicide prevention advocacy groups (e.g., Suicide Prevention Action Network [SPAN]),
- Teacher to parent contacts should occur frequently. Make sure that you know what problems the student may be having,
- Parent to teacher contacts should be facilitated by letting parents know the best time to contact teachers,
- Inform parents well in advance of their child's participation in school activities such as assemblies and programs, and
- Expand the concept of "volunteerism" and actively recruit parents as classroom volunteers during registration process. (1)

The toughest task is titling the program to avoid the stigma of "it is not my child".

Research has found that when schools communicate and involve parents with school activities and programs, parents are more likely to cooperate with the school and help the school maintain these programs (2,3). When schools involve and gain support from parents, students feel more competent and less confused because by working with parents, schools ensure that students receive consistent messages (4).

Although each school and school district should initiate a suicide prevention program that will "fit" well within the culture of their school and will be dictated by the resources available, research suggests that meetings with district leaders, school principals, educators, and potentially a parent group could help facilitate "reconnaissance and relationship development" (5).

Research has found that three of the most important factors that determine if a prevention program is maintained are having support from administrators, teachers, and parents (6,7,8).

Family Partnerships continued

In order for a school and/or school district to ensure that a school-based prevention program will be effectively adopted and maintained, research suggests that schools gain support from parents, administrators, educators, and various community members and that these persons are aware of the prevalence and risk of suicide in their community (9,10,6,11,12,13,8,14,15,16,17,18,19). These persons should also understand how myths, or fictitious beliefs lacking scientific merit, might undermine a community's ability to help a troubled adolescent. For more information on myths behind suicide please refer to Issue Brief 2: "Information Dissemination". Also included in the Guide is a True and False Test for Myths and Evidence-based Facts about adolescent suicide.

Education is the key. Take every opportunity to discuss and educate. Tell the facts and show that this is of high concern to our students. Education and understanding are the keys to providing the students with a good quality of life and an opportunity to learn and not suffer alone. The family **must** be educated, and parental partnerships with the schools, students, and other parents will benefit all parties involved.

Notes

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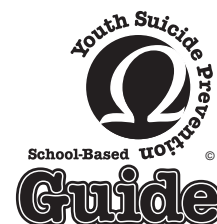
Family Partnerships

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Family Partnerships

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