Suicide Risk Behaviors in Adolescents with Disabilities: Examining the Role of Depressive Symptoms

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MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH RESEARCH FESTIVAL
JUNE 8, 2010
Adolescents and Disability

- Nationally, 10-14% of adolescents have a disability or chronic health condition
- Disabled adolescents share common life experiences despite variety of health conditions
- Similar social and ethical issues related to care and rehabilitation
Past research shows disabled adolescents may be more likely to engage in:

- Risky sexual behaviors
- Daily cigarette smoking
- Frequent alcohol use and binge drinking
- Frequent use of marijuana and other drugs
- Physical fights
- Property destruction and theft
Contextual Risk Factors

Disabled adolescents *less* likely to:
- Enjoy school
- Feel safe at school
- Have high academic achievement

Disabled adolescents *more* likely to report:
- Frequent bullying by peers
- Low social connection to peers
Depression and Disability

European, U.S. and Washington State studies all indicated disabled youth have high rates of depression.

Nationally, disabled adolescents experienced emotional distress and belief they will die early.
Suicide Risk: A Public Health Concern

- In 2008, 2nd leading cause of death for 15-19 year olds in WA
- In 2008, 19% of disabled 8th graders in WA attempted suicide, compared to 6% of non-disabled 8th graders
- U.S. disabled adolescents risk of suicide attempt 3 times greater than non-disabled
Research Questions

Are WA disabled adolescents at higher risk for serious suicide risk behaviors than their non-disabled peers?

How is this association modified by the presence of depressive symptoms?
Data Source

2008 Washington Healthy Youth Survey

- Anonymous, cross-sectional survey, administered every 2 years
- Responses from 10,075 8th, 10th, and 12th graders studied
Measures

Suicide Risk
- Thoughts, plans and/or attempts
- Scale of increasing risk seriousness

Depressive Symptoms
- Feeling sad or hopeless for 2+ weeks

YQOL-DS
- Questions about disabling health conditions
- Disabled youth answered “yes” to at least 1 question

Risk Factors
- Substance use
- School enjoyment
- School safety
- School grades
- Bullying
19% of sample had a disability

Compared to non-disabled adolescents:
- 45% of disabled adolescents had depressive symptoms, compared to 22%
- 16% of disabled adolescents attempted suicide in past year compared to 6%
## Risk and Protective Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>No disability</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>Not depressed</td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>Not depressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels safe at school</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High grades</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullied in past month</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binge drinking</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoked cigarettes</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used other illegal drugs</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Seriousness of Suicide Risk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th></th>
<th>No Disability</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>Not Depressed</td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>Not Depressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No thoughts/behaviors</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts only</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan but no attempt</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One attempt</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple attempts</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Linear Regression results

- Significantly more serious suicide risk among disabled adolescents with and without depressive symptoms
- Adjusted for risk and protective factors and demographics
### Logistic Regression Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Has Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought seriously</td>
<td>1.5* (1.3 to 1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about suicide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned suicide</td>
<td>1.5* (1.2 to 1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attempt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted suicide</td>
<td>1.4* (1.2 to 1.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one or more times</td>
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Adjusted for risk and protective factors and demographics

* Significant at p<0.01
Conclusions

Compared to their non-disabled peers:

- Disabled adolescents have significantly more suicide risk behaviors, even if not depressed
- Disabled adolescents feel less safe at school and are bullied more frequently
- Disabled adolescents use harmful substances more frequently
Recommended

• Disabled adolescents should be targeted in suicide prevention efforts
• Parents and health providers should discuss risk behaviors with disabled adolescents
• School environments should be safer for disabled adolescents
Acknowledgements

- **Thesis Committee:**
  - Jane Rees, PhD (advisor and chair)
  - Elaine Thompson, PhD
  - Leslie Walker, MD

- **Diane Pilkey and Lillian Bensley at Washington State Department of Health**

This study was supported by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration’s Maternal and Child Health Bureau (Title V, Social Security Act), grant #T76MC00011.