

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



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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

Disability and Risky Behaviors



- 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

Description of Sample



- 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



| | Disability | | No disability | |
|--------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Depressed | Not depressed | Depressed | Not depressed |
| Feels safe at school | 69% | 81% | 78% | 90% |
| High grades | 56% | 67% | 65% | 76% |
| Bullied in past month | 43% | 27% | 32% | 18% |
| Binge drinking | 31% | 18% | 25% | 12% |
| Smoked cigarettes | 28% | 16% | 20% | 9% |
| Used other illegal drugs | 16% | 7% | 8% | 3% |

Seriousness of Suicide Risk



| | Disability | | No Disability | |
|------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Depressed | Not Depressed | Depressed | Not Depressed |
| No thoughts/ behaviors | 42% | 84% | 57% | 92% |
| Thoughts only | 12% | 4% | 10% | 2% |
| Plan but no attempt | 17% | 5% | 15% | 3% |
| One attempt | 14% | 3% | 10% | 2% |
| Multiple attempts | 14% | 3% | 9% | 1% |

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



| | Has Disability | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Depressed | Not Depressed |
| Thought seriously about suicide | 1.5* (1.3 to 1.9) | 2.0* (1.6 to 2.5) |
| Planned suicide attempt | 1.5* (1.2 to 1.7) | 1.5* (1.1 to 2.0) |
| Attempted suicide one or more times | 1.4* (1.2 to 1.8) | 2.1* (1.5 to 2.8) |

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

Recommendations



- 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

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