


Suicide and the Exceptional Child: Risk Factors and Special Considerations

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Risk Factors for Suicide

- **Demographic**
 - Males – die by suicide 4-5X females
 - American Indian/Alaska Native Youth – 2.5X higher rate of suicide than other adolescents
 - Hispanic female adolescents – significantly higher rates of suicide attempts than other females

Risk Factors for Suicide

- **Cognitive**
 - Rigid cognitive structure
 - Poor coping/problem solving skills
 - Cognitive distortions
 - External locus of control
 - Inability to take a future-time perspective
 - Perfectionism

Risk Factors for Suicide

- **Environmental**
 - Family dysfunction
 - Parental psychopathology
 - Parental substance abuse
 - Physical or sexual abuse
 - Family history of suicide

Risk Factors for Suicide

- Emotional/Mental Health
- **Most common mental disorders in youth who die by suicide:**
 - Mood Disorders
 - Substance-Related Disorders
 - Disruptive Behavior Disorders
 - **Other types of mental disorders linked to youth suicide**
 - Anxiety Disorders
 - Schizophrenia
 - Borderline Personality Disorder
 - Adjustment Disorder
 - *Hopelessness*

Other Risk Factors

- LGBTQ Youth
- Exposure to Suicide
- Biological Risk Factors (e.g., Serotonin Deficits)
- Social Isolation
- Poor Problem-Solving or Coping Skills
- Limited Access to Mental Health Services
- Access to Lethal Weapons, Particularly Firearms

Risk Factors for Suicide

- Two Most Prominent
 - Presence of at least one mental health disorder
 - History of suicidal behavior, particularly suicide attempts

Precipitating Factors

- Interpersonal Loss
- Disciplinary Crisis
- Legal Trouble
- School Failure/Academic Problems
- Bullying/Victimization
- Extreme Disappointment/Rejection

Additional Triggering Conditions

- Exceptionally high demands
- Medical problem/Diagnosis
- Anniversary dates of painful life events
- Tough transitions
- Loss of a job
- Confirmation of unwanted pregnancy

Students with Disabilities

- 10.3% of students in Colorado have a disability
 - #1: Specific Learning Disability
 - #2 Speech/Language Disability
 - #3 Physical Disability/OHI
 - #4 Serious Emotional Disability

Specific Learning Disability

- Definition: A disorder in one or more of the **basic psychological processes** involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

Other Health Impaired

- Definition: Having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment due to a chronic or acute health problem, including but not limited to asthma, **attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder**, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, leukemia, kidney disease, sickle cell anemia or Tourette syndrome.

Serious Emotional Disability

- Definition: Emotional or social functioning which prevents the child from receiving reasonable educational benefit from general education
- By their very nature, these disabilities result in increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors

Suicide in Children and Youth with Disabilities

- Where's the (recent) research?
 - Difficulty in gathering these data
 - Psychological Autopsies
 - Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System
 - Many studies completed in Foreign Countries

Suicide in Children and Youth with Disabilities

- No surprises: Students with SED: higher rates of suicidal ideation and behaviors
- Students with SLD: higher rates of depression, emotional distress and suicide attempts
- Those with ADHD: also more likely to have suicidal thoughts and behaviors
- Picture unclear: Results of studies looking at suicide in individuals with ID have been mixed

Contributing Nature of Disabilities

- High rates of comorbidity among mental health disorders
- High rates of comorbidity between mental health disorders and other risk factors
- Links between having a disability/being in special education and precipitants
- Relationships between cognitive deficits and depression
- Relationships between diminished problem-solving abilities and suicidal behavior

Comorbidity of Mental Health Disorders and Risk Factors

- Students with SLD: significantly higher depressive symptomatology
- Students with SLD: more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder
- Individuals with disruptive behavior disorders: twice as likely to suffer from depression
- One-third to one-half of all children with ADHD have a coexisting behavioral disorder

Links Between Disabilities and Risk Factors and Precipitating Factors

- **Specific Learning Disability**
 - More likely to struggle with frustration tolerance
 - School Failure/Academic Problems
 - Extreme Disappointment/Rejection
 - Higher levels of stress from demands of school
- ➡ Hopelessness

Links Between Disabilities and Risk Factors and Precipitating Factors

- ADHD and Behavior Disorders:
 - More likely to get into serious trouble at school
 - Increased risk of substance use/abuse
 - More likely to be arrested
 - Impaired peer relations

Suicide Risk Assessment Data

- SRA: determine if a student is suicidal, and if so to what extent
- Study: 3400 SRAs in three years in three districts
 - Kindergarten-12th grade
 - Most frequently in middle school
 - Equal numbers of males and females
 - Females more likely to rated as severe/high risk
 - Only one district tracked SPED status
 - Slight over-representation of kids with disabilities

The Silver Lining of being in SPED

- Already on the radar of specialized service personnel
- Ongoing progress monitoring
- Additional supports in place
- Established home-school relationship/communication

Students with Disabilities: Prevention

- Include depression scales as targeted assessments at Tier 2 and for all students referred for SPED evals
- Routine screening of depression in kids with disabilities
- Assessment of depression and suicidal ideation following crises/potential triggers

Student with Undiagnosed Disabilities

- How to identify and support?
- Elephant in the Room: “Socially Maladjusted”
 - No longer qualify for SPED services – unless they have comorbid SED
 - Increased risk for suicide
 - Relationship between interpersonal violence/bullying and suicide

Summary and Conclusions

- Students with disabilities are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors
- Prevention strategies are effective in reducing these behaviors and saving lives
- We all have a role to play in preventing suicide in children and youth, including those with disabilities

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