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Parent and Family Education

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This column is devoted to innovative techniques and procedures for working with family and parent training. Contributions or questions should be sent to Cameron W. and Betty Jane Meredith, 49 Fairmont, Alton, Illinois 62002.

Teenage Suicide: A Family Oriented Approach to Prevention

Francis X. Walton

Every day an average of 18 young Americans end their lives, one every 90 minutes. While exact numbers are unknown, there are at least 5,000 successful adolescent suicides annually nationwide. In the past 25 years the suicide rate of young people has risen 250 to 300%. Suicide is typically the second or third leading cause of death for young people 15-24 years of age, preceded by accidents and sometimes by homicide (Gelman and Gangelhoff, 1983).

The increase in teenage suicide has been alarming to many. The important question, of course, is what can we do about it? Not only what can we do about it in the immediate situation with a potentially suicidal youngster, but more importantly, what can we do about it over the long haul so that teens are less likely to choose suicide as a means of dealing with life's problems? This article addresses the latter question.

Investigations by child psychiatrist and suicidologist Dr. Mary Giffen indicate relatively few poor young people kill themselves. Research shows that the most likely candidate for suicide is a young person from the middle or upper middle class, whose background seems successful to the outside world; he is doing well in school, being a leader in peer groups, participating in everything from sports to music lessons, and is likely to experience pressure to excel in school and be accepted by a prestigious college. These are young people who are walking a very thin line. As long as things go well, they seem to do very well. When something goes badly, they just do not seem to have the confidence or skills to deal with the situation. The "too perfect" child may be at a greater risk of suicide. A tumble from his excessively high standards and expectations may leave him feeling worthless (Changing Times, 1982).

For other suicidal young people, research shows characteristics that might more likely be expected: life is a series of failures, a high school dropout, a teenager who lacks meaningful social relationships, a young person with no real job or promising future, a boy or girl with little sense of making a contribution to life, or one with a sense of being rejected socially. Commonly, such young people sense themselves to be receiving undeserved criticism from parents or feel misunderstood or unappreciated by parents.

What is the thinking of the suicidal teenager?

Any young person who takes his life, attempts to take his life, or threatens to take his life, is a discouraged human being. No one wishes to stay in a state of discouragement or inferiority. Thus, when young people who have learned to think their very worth is dependent upon meeting some achievement standard, or upon the approval of others, or upon avoiding criticism, and believe that they are falling short of these objectives, they may choose suicide as a method of *revenge* or *escape*.

Suicide as Revenge. Karl Menninger, Kurt Adler, and other experts in the field have pointed out that a revenge motive is almost invariably involved in suicide (Adler, 1980). My own experience in more than 20 years of counseling teenagers supports the conclusion that the suicidal young person very commonly has the idea that someone, usually a loved one, is not treating him as he should be treated. Instead of accepting responsibility to find a more courageous solution to the problem, the youngster decides to punish others by taking his own life.

Suicide as Escape. Escape may be the purpose of suicide if the young

person's objective is primarily to excuse himself from dealing with criticism or failure or lack of approval. Such action is a substitute for the more self-reliant and cooperative alternative of taking responsibility to find a solution that is helpful to him and to fellow human beings.

Overambitious, Pampering, and Coercive Parenting Styles. A review of literature dealing with teen suicide and my experience as a therapist with suicidal young people lead me to conclude that teenagers who take their life or attempt to do so, very commonly have let themselves be negatively influenced by overambitious, pampering, or coercive parenting styles (Walton, 1987).

The perfectionist, overambitious, young person may become revengeful toward one or both parents whom he pictures as locking him into the dependency of perfectionism. Clearly, in such cases, it is not the desire to achieve well that is troublesome to the discouraged teen, but rather the hopelessness and vindictiveness that is generated when the dependent teen mistakenly believes his happiness is outside of his control. When high achievement standards are combined with a pampering influence, the development of one's skills to deal with adversity is retarded. When such high standards are combined with coercive parenting, the teenager is likely to develop a sense of being constrained. The vindictive thinking and action of the teen are directed at those whom he holds responsible for his weakness or for his *constraint*.

Dependency and vindictiveness can be seen most clearly and most commonly in the pampered teenager (Walton, 1980). Few human beings can be as disrespectful of others as the pampered teen who has learned to believe that his parents should be servants to him. But those who wish to offer effective leadership to young people must also realize the dependency that parents help to create by their effort to coerce their youngster, thereby depriving the teen of the self-esteem and self-reliance that develops when a child experiences success in decision making.

Parent educators tend to be highly aware that the way to help young people become self-reliant and confident is to give responsibility and not hold on to it so dearly ourselves, not to lecture about it, and surely not to solve problems *for* young people. The link between dependency and suicide is a strong one. Giffen responds to the issue this way: "Why has the teen suicide rate been rising? Because children are becoming even more dependent upon parents." And further, "I'd rather license parenting than marriage. That is where people need training" (People Weekly, 1983).

In the same vein, Allen Berman, past president of the American Association of Suicidology, commented:

A common thread [in teen suicide] is the inability to separate oneself from the

family and solve problems on one's own. What makes the child suicidal is that he hasn't learned in the process of growing up, sufficient ways to cope with losses and anticipated losses . . . (Pouschine, 1985).

And more on the dependent state of teenagers by Paul Goodman (1956) in *Growing Up Absurd*: "The greatest problem that young people have today is their own uselessness."

The relationship between being a responsibility-taker as a youngster and leading happy and productive lives was further supported in a recently reported 40-year Harvard study which involved 456 teenage boys.

When they were compared at middle age, one fact stood out: regardless of intelligence, family income, ethnic background, or amount of education, those who had worked as boys, even at simple household chores, enjoyed happier and more productive lives than those who had not. "The link between what the men had done as boys and how they turned out as adults was startlingly sharp. Those highest on the boyhood activity scale were twice as likely to have warm relations with a wide variety of people, five times as likely to be well paid and 16 times less likely to have been significantly unemployed. . . . The group who had worked least in childhood were far more likely to have been arrested, ten times more likely to have been mentally ill—and six times as many of them had died (Keister and Keister, 1986).

Perhaps the single biggest mistake we have made in raising our children is to teach them year after year, in home and in school, that the decisions affecting their lives are outside of their control.

Typically we raise children for 18 years as if the real solution to problems is outside of their hands, and then we wonder why they have so much difficulty developing the self-confidence to cope with problems in their lives.

This appears to be especially true in many of our middle class and upper middle class homes where parents too often are concerned about making life easier for their children than they had it.

The very physical arrangements of modern suburban communities deprive children of some opportunities to solve daily problems such as walking to school, dealing with adverse weather conditions, getting to football practice or to a friend's house. It's impractical to think that we would rearrange our communities, but we certainly can build psychological muscle to cope with problems and instill a sense of confidence in our young people by avoiding those leadership techniques that tend to weaken children's problem-solving abilities and sense of worth.

The route to improvement in this area is clear. Those who wish to stimulate young people to develop the skills to cope with life's challenges must learn to recognize the specific practices in home and school that exclude young people from reasonable opportunities to have a hand in solving the problems that life presents to them. We must identify those

practices and rid ourselves of them, while substituting practices, policies, and systems that invite young people into a new era of incredibly more respectful relationships with adults and with their environment.

Unless we stop using the mistaken approaches to leadership that tend to stimulate our youngsters to picture themselves as being in a position of weakness and inferiority, and substitute those techniques that stimulate the development of strength and confidence, we are likely to see a continuing tendency for our sons and daughters and students to choose this uncourageous and vindictive method of dealing with the problems that life presents to them.

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Anything which is forced or misunderstood can never be beautiful.

Xenophon

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