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School Suicide Courses Promote Suicide And So Do TV Suicide Movies, Studies Show

Two separate new studies have concluded that suicide curricula in the schools and made-for-television movies about teen suicide do more harm than good. Classroom courses for high schoolers and TV movies for the public have been presented during the last five years as "suicide-prevention" programs, supposedly designed to help combat the high rate of suicides among teenagers.

But the two unrelated studies now indicate that these efforts are harmful, not helpful. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people age 15 to 24.

According to a Columbia University study reported in the December 26 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, researchers found that the classroom courses were "ineffective" in altering deviant attitudes among teenagers who had attempted suicide, and even produced "evidence of unwanted effects." The teenagers continued to believe that suicide was a possible solution to their problems and that they would be less likely to seek help.

The study found that the courses stir up anger when teenagers discuss the problem. The research disclosed that those who attempted suicide knew kids who had attempted suicide. Those exposed to the programs were significantly more likely to "talk about suicide" and more likely to try to kill

themselves. The researchers concluded that, "There is a need to evaluate such programs to determine their efficacy and safety." The results "cause for concern."

The Columbia University team was headed by David Shaffer, director of the division of child and adolescent psychiatry at the medical school. It studied the impact of suicide-prevention programs on the attitudes of students in the 9th and 10th grades who had taken a suicide course in a public school.

Suicide courses have become something of a fad in the last five years, and some states have even mandated that they be taught in the public schools. The suicide and "death and dying" courses deal with the subject by having a counselor who has had only 6 to 10 hours of training lead discussions in a classroom setting. The courses are based on the unproved concepts that suicide is caused by typical teenage stresses and that all teenagers share a potential vulnerability to suicide.

But most students are not at risk for suicide and it is unwise to expose them to classroom discussions about suicide. The Columbia researchers concluded that, because of the negative reactions to the suicide courses and the evidence of "imitative or stimulatory effect on suicidal behavior" among adolescents, "the practice of addressing such programs to unselected audiences should be viewed with caution."

Asked to comment on the study, a psychiatrist who is an authority on suicides but is not connected with the Columbia University project, Dr. Jan Fawcett, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Rush Presbyterian-St. Luke's Hospital in Chicago, said: "You can't just get kids not to commit suicide by just educating them about the program and telling them where to get help. It's not an intellectual exercise. There's more to it than that."

Dr. Fawcett said that suicide needs to be deromanticized. "Kids are very suggestible. They see reports about suicide on television and may begin to see suicide as a way to end their troubles or make their parents feel bad."

TV Movies About Suicide

Movies about teenage suicide which purport to caution young people against it may actually have the opposite effect, according to a new report. This is the first systematic analysis of the content of media portrayals of teen suicide.

Dr. Daniel Castellanos, a psychiatrist at the University of Miami formerly with Columbia University Department of Child Psychology, announced preliminary findings of an analysis completed by himself and other researchers at Columbia about media images of teen suicide. With a grant from the American Suicide Foundation, the researchers studied four made-for-television movies about teen suicide. The movies, *Surviving*, *Silence of the Heart*, *Hear Me Cry*, and *Desperate Exit* all originally aired on television in 1985 and 1986 and were aimed at teenage audiences.

In the movies, "Teenagers who succeeded at killing themselves were portrayed as stronger, more likable people than those who attempted suicide but lived," said Castellanos in a presentation to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Chicago. "In one movie, the boy who killed himself was the football quarterback, was rich, had a girlfriend and his own car. But another boy who attempted suicide and survived was portrayed as a nerd, a loner, someone without friends."

The researchers found eight specific features of these movies that could be considered "dangerous" because they either "glamorize, simplify, or otherwise distort the true picture of suicide":

- They show detailed descriptions of how to commit suicide.
- Those who commit suicide are often shown as attractive, engaging, and popular, placing them in the position of adolescent role models.
- The programs eliminate or ignore the harmful consequences of suicide attempts, i.e., disfigurement, paralysis, or brain damage.
- Oversimplified or trivial events such as a low exam grade are shown as triggers to suicide.
- Although most real teen suicide victims are chronically troubled and unhappy, television does not usually show this.
- Television portrays suicide as a means of becoming famous or "getting even."
- Effective treatments are not shown; instead they discuss ineffective and unconvincing remedies such as "reaching out and touching."
- The emphasis on blaming others for the teen's suicide may foster undeserved guilt in surviving family members and friends of those who kill themselves.

A team of 30 experts in adolescent suicide rated the contents of a dozen films for this report.

Castellanos said that the films could be dangerous for some teenagers who "have distorted notions" and believe that suicide "is a rational solution to something like being angry." Some movies presented suicide in so much detail that they became "how to" episodes.

Castellanos said that the researchers thought teen suicide should be addressed, but "it's just a matter of how," although he and the researchers "hadn't yet formulated specific ideas" on how suicide should be portrayed. The complete report on the media's portrayal of teen suicides will be released in early 1991.