Policies and Protocols for Suicide Risk and Post-vention: Is Your Agency Ready?

Dr. Richard Scott
School Counseling Specialist
Maryland State Department of Education

Dr. Sally Dorman
Psychological Services Specialist
Maryland State Department of Education
Suicidal Behavior and Legal Issues

- Youth suicide is the third-leading cause of death among children and adolescents in the U.S.
- Schools have a moral and legal responsibility to keep children safe
- School districts have been found liable for not offering suicide prevention programs, for providing inadequate supervision of at-risk students, and for failing to notify parents when their children were suicidal
- It is important to have agency policies and procedures for dealing with suicidal youth
Suicide Policies

- Have a referral process system to handle suicidal youth
- Inform all gatekeepers of warning signs of youth suicide
- Assign a “designated reporter” who receives and acts upon all reports
- Have the designated reporter assess the severity of the risk

Suicide Policies

- Collaborate with colleagues throughout the assessment, at least one administrator and one other mental health professional (counselor, school psychologist, PPW, social worker, etc.)

- Explain the limits of confidentiality during situations involving abuse of a minor, risk of harm to self, and risk of harm to others

Suicide Policies

- Notify parents-Duty to warn of severity of suicidal risk
- Secure needed mental health services
- Seek help of law enforcement or emergency services when appropriate (student becomes combative, flees, etc.)

Suicide Policies

- Supervise the student at all times, never leave student alone, and do not send home unaccompanied by a responsible adult
- Provide follow up at school for the student
- Develop a process/form for documenting interventions and assessment

State Initiatives

- Linkages to Life: Maryland’s Plan for Youth Suicide
  - Prevention
  - Intervention
  - Post-Vention
  - Methodology

- Mental Hygiene Administration’s Position Paper on Suicide Prevention
  - Adults/Older Adult

- Garrett Lee Smith Prevention Grant
State Initiatives

- Maryland Youth Crisis Hotline-1-800-422-0009-first in the nation
- Governor’s Commission on Suicide
- House Bill 973- required each local board of education to provide each student in grades 6-12 with the telephone number of the Maryland Youth Crisis Hotline by:
  - Printing it proximately in the school handbook
  - Printing it on students’ school identification cards
School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs and Initiatives

- In-service training for school personnel
- Gatekeeper training
- Curriculum prevention programs for students
- Individual risk assessment and screening programs
School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs: In-Service Training

- Widely used in schools

- Typically includes following:
  - Discussion of warning signs
  - Discussion of sample cases
  - Referral procedures
Gatekeeper Programs

- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)
- Suicide Alertness for Everyone (SafeTalk)
Curriculum
Screening Programs
Warning Signs for Youth Suicide

- Suicide threats
- Suicide plan/method/access
- Making final arrangements
- Sudden changes in behavior, friends, or personality
- Changes in physical habits and appearance
- Preoccupation with death and suicide themes
- Increased inability to concentrate or think clearly
- Loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities
- Symptoms of depression
- Increased use and abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
What Are We Looking For?

- Social isolation
- Failure to complete high school
- Involvement in correctional system
- Lack of vocational success
- Health problems—chronically ill
- Individuals
- Dramatic changes in behavior
- Giving away personal possessions
- Preoccupations with death
- Specific suicide plans
Suicide Postvention: Recommended “Dos” and “Don’ts”

- Do plan in advance of any crisis
- Do select and train a crisis team
- Do verify that a suicide occurred
- Do disseminate information to faculty, students, and parents; be truthful but avoid unnecessary detail
- Do report information to students in small groups (classrooms) using fact sheets and uniform statements
- Do not release information about the suicide in a mass assembly or over a loud speaker
- Do have extra counselors available on site for students and staff

Suicide Postvention: Recommended “Dos” and “Don’ts”

- Do not dismiss school or stop classes
- Do not dedicate a memorial, fly flag at half-mast, or have a moment of silence for deceased; develop living memorials instead (e.g., student assistance programs)
- Do allow students, with parental permission, to attend the funeral
- Do not make special arrangements to send all students from a class or school to the funeral
- Do contact the family and offer any assistance
- Do collaborate with media, law enforcement, and community agencies

Postvention Strategies

- Develop trauma response process
- Partner with local crisis agencies—i.e., hospice center
- Initiate counseling response team
- Develop tracking risk assessment system and outcomes, including follow up
- Develop local crisis manual/handbook with guidelines
Suicide Postvention: Media Guidelines

- Do not sensationalize with front page coverage and/or details of suicide method
- Do not print pictures of deceased
- Do not report the suicide as simplistic or romantic
- Do emphasize that no one person or thing is to blame
- Do provide information on suicide prevention
- Do provide information about where students can go for help, including both school and community resources
- Do emphasize that suicide is a preventable problem, and that we all have a role in it

Web-Based Resources

- Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

- National Association of School Psychologists
  - [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

- American Association of Sociology
  - [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
  - [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

- Centers for Disease Control
  - [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
References


