

IDENTIFYING SUICIDE CONCERNS IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Suicide in children and young adolescents is a rare event therefore any talk or threats of suicide need to be taken seriously. Children and young adolescents who are highly disadvantaged and come from problematic family backgrounds are most at risk (Beautrais 2001). If suicidal ideation or a suicide attempt is identified in a child or young adolescent, they need to be referred for a specialist psychiatric assessment.

Assessing suicide risk in children and young adolescents is challenging. A child's verbal skills, concepts of time/causality, and understanding of death all contribute to the challenge of getting accurate information. Distress and suicidal thoughts may be expressed in behaviour rather than verbally. Obtaining information from other sources especially parents/caregivers is important. There needs to be some caution around this as there is potential for minimising due to difficulties in acknowledging their child could feel suicidal.

Guidelines in asking children and young adolescents about suicide

- Use direct language.
- Be mindful of the emotional impact on the child when asking about suicide.
- Be aware that children's understanding can fluctuate in the context of emotional distress.
- It is important to find out both what they did (or intended to do) and what they thought this would achieve. Children vary in their level of understanding the potential lethality of different acts (e.g., taking two paracetamol thinking this would kill them).
- It is important to get an understanding of what they wanted to gain from their actions eg. wanting to be noticed, wanting to get out of an intolerable situation.

Suggested questions (adapted from Jacobsen et al. 1994)

Asking about Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour

- Did you ever feel so upset that you wished you were not alive or dead?
- Did you ever do something that you knew was so dangerous that you could get hurt or killed?
- Did you ever hurt yourself or try to hurt yourself?
- Did you ever try to kill yourself?
- What did you do to try and kill yourself?
- What did you think would happen when you did this?

Assessment of Suicidal Intent

- Did you tell anyone that you wanted to die or were thinking about killing yourself?
- Did you do anything to get ready to kill yourself?
- Was anyone near you or with you when you tried to kill yourself?
- After you tried to kill yourself, did you still want to die, or did you want to live?

Use of prompts may be helpful

- Do you think about killing yourself more than once or twice a day?
- Have you tried to kill yourself since last school holidays?
- What did you think would happen when you tried to jump out the window?
- What would happen if you died; what would that be like?

References

1. Jacobsen L.K., Rabinowitz I., Popper M.S., Solomon R.J., Sokol M.S., Pfeffer C.R. (1994) Interviewing prepubertal children about suicide ideation and behaviour. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 33 4 439-452
2. Ashworth J. (2001). *Practice principles: a guide for mental health clinicians working with suicidal children and youth*. Ministry of Children and Family Development, British Columbia.
3. Beautrais, AL. (2001). *Child and young adolescent suicide in New Zealand*. *Australia New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. 35: 647-653