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HEALTH & WELLNESS

A Rise in Suicides by Young Children Leaves Families Searching for Answers

Suicidal thoughts and attempts are more common in younger children than previously thought, and parents often don't know

By *Andrea Petersen*

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Before 10-year-old Kelly Wright killed herself, there was no warning, says her father, Stuart Wright. The bubbly child who loved to draw, hike and go canoeing was showing her parents dance moves the night before she died, Mr. Wright says.

Kelly didn't seem sad or withdrawn; she excelled in school and made friends easily. And Mr. Wright couldn't imagine that a 10-year-old could even consider suicide.

"I'm never going to make any sense of it," said Mr. Wright, 63, who was living near Tampa, Fla., at the time of his daughter's death in January 2020.

The number of children dying by suicide has risen dramatically in recent years. Parents often don't know that their children are having suicidal thoughts, new research shows. Among females ages 10 to 14, the rate of suicide more than tripled between 2007 and 2020, from 0.5 per 100,000 to 2 per 100,000 according to data from the National Center for Health Statistics. Among males the same age, the rate jumped from 1.2 per 100,000 to 3.6 per 100,000 over the same period.

Although the numbers are tiny compared with the number of older adolescents and adults who die by suicide, it is now the second leading cause of death among children in this age group.

Mr. Wright, who now volunteers for the Alliance of Hope, a nonprofit that provides support to those who have lost loved ones to suicide, warns other families to be aware of the danger. "This can absolutely happen to your kid," he said.

Suicidal thoughts and attempts are much more common in younger children than previously thought, new research is finding. Among 9- and 10-year-olds and their parents who were asked if the children had suicidal thoughts or made suicide attempts during their lifetime, 14.3% reported suicidal thoughts and 1.26% reported suicide attempts, according to an analysis of data from a large study of adolescent health and brain development that is following nearly 12,000 youngsters across the U.S. The paper was published in 2021 in the journal *Translational Psychiatry*.



Psychologists and psychiatrists say they don't know for certain why the incidence of suicidal thoughts and behaviors is rising among American children. The numbers upend a long-held belief that children who haven't hit puberty yet don't think about killing themselves or, if they do, that those thoughts are fleeting.

New research is uncovering risk factors in younger children like family conflict and early exposure to alcohol. Depression is most commonly associated with suicidal thoughts in older teens and adults, but in younger children scientists are finding that ADHD and behavior problems are also closely linked to suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Some scientists point to greater access to information about suicide online, including details on lethal means, noting that even many young children have smartphones. Others cite the increase in gun ownership in American households.

'I'm never going to make any sense of it.'

— Stuart Wright, whose 10-year-old daughter, Kelly, killed herself in 2020

Studies have found a link between Black children's experience of discrimination and suicidal thoughts. Among 5- to 12-year-olds, Black children are about two times more likely to die by suicide than white children, says Arielle H. Sheftall, principal investigator at the Center for Suicide Prevention and Research at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Ohio.

Children who identify as gay or bisexual and those who have lower family incomes have a higher risk of suicide attempts, research shows.

Some mental-health clinicians also believe that exposure to violence in the home, community and in the media contributes to suicidal thoughts and behaviors among young children. And youth suicides can lead other vulnerable young people to take their own lives, in what researchers call suicide contagion, which can drive a rising rate even higher.

Especially worrying to parents and therapists is that suicidal thoughts and behaviors tend to persist as youngsters use them as a way of coping with distress, says Joan Luby, a professor of child psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

"The older a child gets, the more seriously dangerous this behavior can become and the rates of completed suicide are going to get higher," she says.

Much of the new insight on pre-adolescent suicide is coming from the continuing 10-year study being funded by the National Institutes of Health. Researchers around the country have been analyzing a wave of data available on the children collected beginning when they were around 9 to 10 years old.



High family conflict is linked to suicidal thoughts in 9- to 10-year-olds, according to an analysis published in 2020 in the journal JAMA Network Open. “We think it taps into feeling like you’re not connected to people, feeling unloved or feeling like a burden,” said Deanna Barch, a professor of psychological and brain sciences at Washington University in St. Louis and a co-author of the paper.

Dr. Barch and her colleagues also found that low levels of parental monitoring—such as not knowing where children are after school or what they are doing online—was linked to suicidal thoughts and attempts. Dr. Barch said low monitoring might increase the chances children could access information about suicide or become victims of cyberbullying. It also might indicate that children aren’t able to get help with difficult emotions and experiences.

Parents are usually in the dark about their children’s suicidal thoughts and behaviors, the researchers found. Of the children who said they had suicidal thoughts, 77% of their parents reported that the children didn’t have any suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Several studies have found that children with ADHD and behavior problems such as getting into fights are more likely to have suicidal thoughts and behaviors. “If a kid grows up with uncontrolled symptoms, they perceive themselves as being a failure with friends, at school,” says Ran Barzilay, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. For children with serious behavior problems, taking ADHD medications is linked to fewer suicidal thoughts and attempts, according to a study by Dr. Barzilay and colleagues that was published in 2021 in the journal JAMA Network Open.

Dr. Sheftall believes that some children with ADHD diagnoses may actually be depressed. While depression is usually thought of as manifesting as sadness and loneliness, she thinks it might look like irritability and acting out in younger children.

Doctors recommend that parents discuss feelings, including sadness and frustration, with even young children. Share ways to handle difficult emotions, and tell your children your love is unconditional. Ask your children directly if they are having suicidal thoughts. And secure firearms, household cleaners and medications.

Even children with no obvious risk factors can harm themselves in an impulsive moment of distress, psychiatrists note.

Mr. Wright says that since his daughter’s death, he has read up on the risk factors of suicide and that Kelly had none. “She grew up in a very loving home. She was our lives,” he said.

Mr. Wright said he regrets not talking with Kelly, who died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, about suicide.

“If I could rewind the clock, I would sit down and ask her: ‘Have you ever thought of hurting yourself? Do you know what suicide is?,” said Mr. Wright, who has relocated to Louisiana with his wife.

Since his daughter's death, Mr. Wright says her full name—Kelly Helen Wright—aloud every morning. He places fresh flowers near a photo of her and, when he's at home, keeps a candle lit. On her birthday in April, he marks the day with cake and balloons.

"I speak directly to Kelly and tell her this candle represents the light you brought into our lives," he said. "This light will never go out as long as I'm alive."

Do you need help? The contact number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255.

Write to Andrea Petersen at andrea.petersen@wsj.com

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