

COMMENTARY

Is Life losing its Worth in the eyes of today's Children? A review on Suicidal tendencies

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SUMMARY

Suicidal attempts and suicides among children & teenagers are on rise in past few years. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among those aged 10–24 years. Modern era has witnessed that the children have the ability to plan and execute a suicidal act. Considering such valuable loss of lives by suicide, it is of serious public health concern. Suicide by a child causes significant grief and depression for siblings, parents, and near ones exposed to suicide. Mental health and social distress among children must be paid great attention to reduce suicidal behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is defined as the purposeful killing of oneself, whereas a suicide attempt is defined as an act of intentional self-harm with the intent to die.(1) Every year, around 7 lakh people die by suicide worldwide. Suicide is a global problem that occurs in all regions of the world, not just in high-income countries. In fact, in 2019, low- and middle-income nations accounted for more than 77 percent of global suicides. (2)

Every suicide is indeed a traumatic event that claims an individual's life terribly early and has a long-term impact on near and dear, and also society as a whole. This alarming issue, which is on the rise, affects people of all ages in communities, while it is most prevalent among those aged 15 to 30.(2) Suicide is the second leading cause of death among those aged 10–24 years.(3) Although adolescents are more likely to commit suicide, it cannot be overlooked that children are also at risk of suicidal ideation. It was once thought that pre-adolescents were incapable of committing suicide. It was believed that children could not comprehend death as permanent and irreversible. They also lack the ability to plan and execute a suicidal act. Younger children may use a different method to

commit suicide, but they do plan, attempt, and successfully complete suicide.(4) Children and teens have reported suicidal behaviours and successful attempts in past years.(5-7) According to Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India (ADSI) Reports, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 11,396 children reportedly died in India in 2020, an 18% increase from 9,613 such deaths in 2019(8) and a 21% increase from 9,413 in 2018(9). Suicide contributes to approximately 31 deaths per day, or more than 1 child committing suicide each hour in India.(10) Surrounded by a lot of stigma, suicide is a multidimensional, intricate consequence caused by a multitude of psycho social factors. A suicide attempt is critical indicator of mental health and emotional distress in the communities.

Causes of escalating suicidal tendency among children and teens:

As per the reported incidents in NCRB database(8), the five major causes of suicides among children in India include family problems, failure in examination, love affairs, illness and marriage related issues. (Figure 1) Other reasons for child suicide included ideological reasons or hero worship, unemployment, bankruptcy, death of dear ones, and drug abuse.

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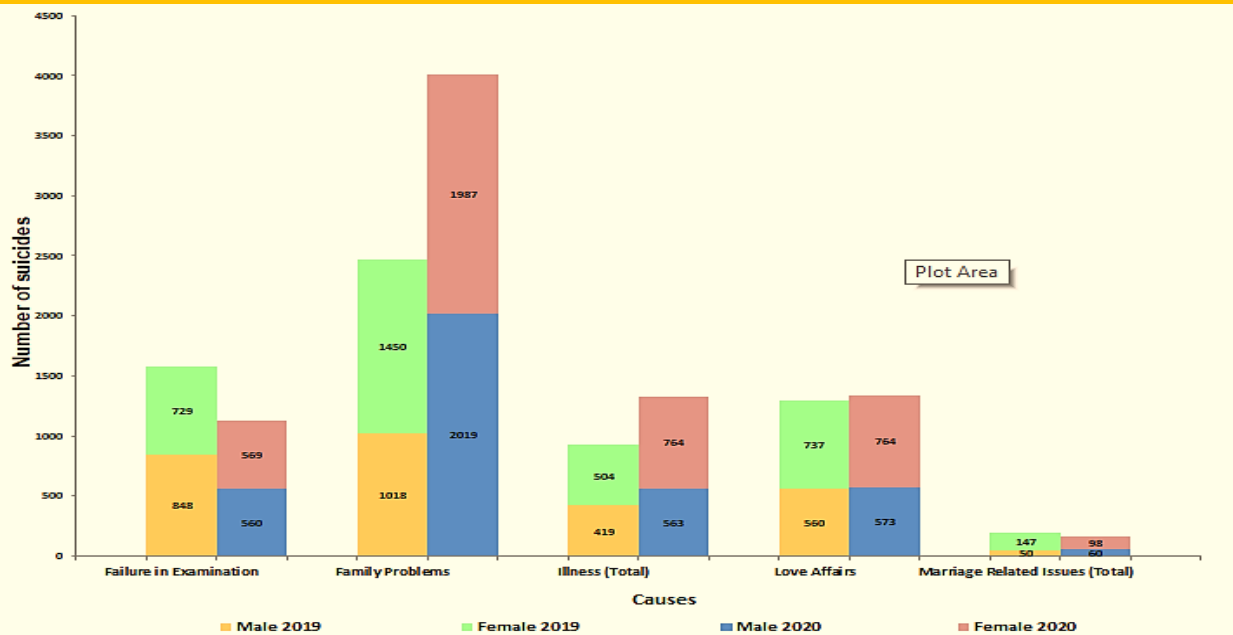
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- **Effect of Family issues:** Many scientific studies have reported that family relationships are associated with suicidal behaviour. Freudenstein et al. reported that the adolescents whose mother show carefree and overprotective behaviour have higher suicidal tendency.(11) Furthermore, it has been shown that abuse (physical and/or sexual)(12) and child maltreatment(13) is linked to raised suicide-related behaviours.
- **Academic stressors:** In today's competitive world even children are compelled to work harder than ever for their growth. However, pressure to succeed may lend children into mental distress. It has been observed that the students who believe they are failing in keeping up with their academic performance are more likely to have suicidal thoughts, intentions, threats, or attempts, as well as deliberate self-injury.(14)
- **Influence of media:** Children and young teenagers are prone to imitative behaviour. Children, in particular, are excellent copycats, continually enacting what they see. The media's sensational reporting may have a deleterious impact on the

vulnerable. Chowdhury et al reported eighteen incidents of suicides by imitative hangings among youngsters in West Bengal resulting in five deaths following media coverage of a hanging case.(7)

- **Role of video-gaming:** A child life is accompanied with play. Modern children are found to like video gaming a lot. But it is surprisingly alarming to know that violent game play has been found to increase depression and suicide risk.(15) More than five hours of video gaming influence levels of depression, suicide ideation, and suicide planning among teenagers according to the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (YRBS) for 2007-2009.(16)
- **Pandemic Thrust:** Pandemic saw the ever increased alarming raised frequency of suicides among children and teens. This may be attributed to the fact that closure of schools and restrictions in movement have led to children feeling isolated. Strong suicidal ideation among schoolchildren may be due to the development and/or aggravation of fear, anxiety, depression, and other psychological illnesses as a result of the pandemic.(17)

FIGURE 1 MAJOR FIVE CAUSE-WISE SUICIDES IN INDIA IN <18 YEARS AGE GROUP



Source: NCRB data ADSI Report 2019(9) and 2020(8)

Implications of suicidal attempts and deaths of children:

Every suicide is indeed a traumatic event that claims an individual's life terribly early and has a long-term impact on near and dear, and also on

society as a whole. Previous studies have reported that parents who have lost a child are more likely to experience mental discomfort or psychiatric issues. The loss of a child significantly increases the probability of parents committing suicide.(18) Suicide or its attempt when carried out by any of the family member or close friend or accompanied person, it leaves a negative shadow in the minds of people around them. The after-effects of such an experience among close kin is thought provoking. It has been reported that the suicide bereaved people are more likely to engage in suicidal activity, develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), experience protracted grief, and develop depression. Research on the impact of suicide death on non-kin connections, such as classmates, is still in its early stages.(19)

WAY FORWARD

Suicidal behaviour among children needs our attention as a potentially serious public health issue, yet prevention and control are sadly difficult to achieve. While one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all people of all ages, suicide prevention is not an easy endeavour. A loving, supporting environment and careful attention to any emerging psychiatric symptoms in children and teens, especially during and after the COVID-19 can ward off most of the stressors in life. In order to identify and link these children to appropriate services and support programs, all stakeholders, including individuals, families, communities and health service providers must collaborate in detecting and comprehending risk behaviour, dangers, and protective factors among children. To address a range of traumatic situations that children may have experienced, such as abuse, neglect, and exploitation, child-friendly mental health and legal services are required to be strengthened and made accessible.

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