Suicide Prevention in Schools: Strategies for COVID-19

August 28, 2020

News Type: Director's Corner

Addressing the mental health needs of students in school communities [1] is more important than ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the stress and trauma faced by many students while bringing new challenges, such as isolation and increased risk for adversity at home. Schools play a unique and critical role in addressing the pandemic's potential mental health effects [2] and preventing suicide [3]. While COVID-19 has altered the educational landscape, it is imperative that schools are prepared [4] for students to return in the fall by considering the impact of the pandemic on their well-being—regardless of the learning approach used. That includes using school-based suicide prevention resources [5], tailoring strategies to the current context, and ensuring school staff have the support they need to do their jobs effectively.

Preventing suicide in any school setting requires a comprehensive approach [6]. This framework can be adapted to the needs of an individual school and its COVID-19 learning approach, whether in-person, remote, or hybrid. Key principles that all schools should consider are a commitment to promoting emotional well-being and connectedness [7] among students, as well as identifying [8] those who may be at risk for suicide and connecting them to help. In thinking about how to tailor these principles for each school community and its students, we must acknowledge that the pandemic has also brought persistent racism and racial and ethnic disparities [9] into focus. Individual and community needs, and their inequitable distribution, are essential factors to keep in mind when designing and implementing suicide prevention strategies, services, and supports in schools.

Due to physical distancing, COVID-19 requires innovative strategies for promoting connectedness. Schools can adapt trauma-informed strategies [10] to address the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of students virtually. Such strategies [11] include providing structure and routines, promoting self-regulation and resilience, conducting emotional check-ins, and maintaining ongoing communication. Schools can also support the development of meaningful relationships [12] between youth, their peers, and caring adults over phone or video. Since some students may not have consistent access to technology, schools can encourage letter writing, pair students with phone buddies, or set up phone calls with students and families. To help ensure ongoing connectedness and safety, schools should be aware of and regularly update students' locations and emergency contact information.

It is also important for schools to continue to implement recommended suicide risk screening [13], coordinated care

plans, and regular check-ins with the families of students at risk. To provide effective suicide care, schools must adjust to using telehealth [14] and conduct safety planning and other interventions [15] virtually. We also recommend school staff continually assess additional stressors students may experience during the pandemic, such as decreased social support, increased anxiety, food insecurity, abuse and violence, and disruptions in routines. Tools that reduce stress and anxiety can be adapted for virtual implementation, such as mindfulness [16], physical activity [17], and art.

As schools reopen in the fall, a multi-pronged approach [18] to preventing suicide should also include educating staff about trauma and mental health, forming school-community partnerships, and encouraging staff self-care. It is particularly important that teachers and other school staff have the tools [19] and resources [20] to take care of their own health and well-being. School leaders should keep in mind that teachers and other staff may be struggling with their own personal and family stressors, while at the same time being asked to support students. Strategies [21] for supporting school staff include offering virtual check-ins with counselors or administrators, encouraging self-care through employee assistance programs, and engaging substitutes when staff need to take time off.

Ultimately, there is no "one-size-fits all" approach that schools can take, but the above suggestions provide some guiding principles and examples of effective strategies. As schools reopen, it is our role as school leaders, teachers, parents, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to take a comprehensive approach to help alleviate mental health disparities and ensure the health and well-being of our students. We must be proactive in preventing youth suicide—and doing so requires strong partnerships and making resources and supports available to achieve this goal.

Nisha Sachdev, DrPH, PsyD, is adjunct professor in the Milken Institute School of Public Health at the George Washington University and senior associate at the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools.

Olga Acosta Price, PhD, is associate professor in the Milken Institute School of Public Health at the George Washington University and director of the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools.

Links within this resource
[1] http://www.sprc.org/settings/schools
[2] https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm
[3] https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30171-1/fulltext
[4] https://schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/Publications/SchoolReentry.pdf
[5] http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs?type=All&populations=All&settings=114&problem=All&planning=All&strategies=All&state=All
[6] https://www.sprc.org/effective-prevention/comprehensive-approach
[7] https://www.sprc.org/comprehensive-approach/social-connectedness
[8] https://www.sprc.org/comprehensive-approach/identify-assist
[9] https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/multimedia-article/covid-19-brings-persistent-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-to-focus-implications-for-population-mental-health/
[10] https://www.nctsn.org/resources/trauma-informed-school-strategies-during-covid-19
[11] https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/blogs/blog30_supporting-students-experiencing-trauma-during-COVID-19-pandemic.asp
[12] https://pttcnetwork.org/centers/northeast-caribbean-pttc/product/promoting-youth-engagement-connectedness-covid-19-world
[13] https://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/resource-program/Recommendations%20for%20School-Based%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Screening.pdf
[14] http://zerosuicide.edc.org/sites/default/files/Telehealth%20and%20Suicide%20Care%20During%20the%20CO

VID-19%20Pandemic.pdf

[15] https://www.heardalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-Interventions-and-Resources-for-Students-in-a-Mental-Health-or-Suicidal-Crisis.pdf

[16] https://www.mindfulschools.org/free-online-mindfulness-class-for-kids/

[17] https://www.actionforhealthykids.org/covid-19-resources-physical-activity-nutrition-more/

[18] https://www.childtrends.org/blog/as-schools-reopen-addressing-covid-19-related-trauma-and-mental-health-issues-will-take-more-than-mental-health-services

[19] https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/northeast-caribbean-mhttc/product/tools-educators-during-public-health-crisis

[20] https://content.acsa.org/coronavirus-in-ca-schools/school-staff-self-care-during-covid-19

[21] https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/crisis-and-mental-health-resources/coping-with-the-covid-19-crisis-the-importance-of-care-for-caregivers

Printed on 01/23/2021 from   https://sprc.org/news/suicide-prevention-schools-strategies-covid-19