

Research in Brief: Factors Impacting Success of School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs

Suicide ranks as one of the leading causes of death among Canadian youth aged 16-24. Suicide attempts are roughly 20 times more common than completed suicides.

Given that children and adolescents spend the majority of their time in an education setting, schools are an ideal location for the delivery of suicide prevention initiatives. School-based suicide prevention programs may be aimed at all students, or they may target specific high-risk groups.

Are school-based suicide prevention programs effective?

Suicide prevention programs tend to be difficult to evaluate, due to considerable variation across curricula, as well as to the challenge of accurately reporting deaths by suicide. At present, no evidence conclusively supports the use of any one specific type of intervention. A recent realist review examined characteristics of interventions linked to a reduction in suicide attempts.

What is a realist review?

A realist review presents research findings with the goal of explaining those findings rather than critiquing them; it seeks to understand the theories behind the studies it reviews, and takes a qualitative approach to examining their context and the mechanisms by which interventions work or do not work. In other words, this method seeks to determine what works, for whom, and in what circumstances.

Theories on why some school-based suicide prevention programs may work:

- They target underlying mental health problems
- They address drug and alcohol use, risk factors for suicide
- They teach problem-solving and coping skills
- They address cultural barriers and taboos around suicide

Programs with a clear connection between the theory of their effects and their activities may be more likely to work. In other words, if the program's theoretical framework involves increasing problem-solving and coping skills, then the program should actively teach those skills, and provide meaningful opportunities to practice and improve them.

Why does this matter?

- ⇒ Suicide is the leading cause of non-accidental death in Canada among young people aged 16-24.
- ⇒ While schools may be an ideal setting in which to deliver suicide prevention programs, many questions remain regarding their effectiveness.
- ⇒ Some program characteristics may increase the likelihood of their success, while others can lessen their chances for success.
- ⇒ The way in which a program is implemented can also affect its success.

The Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being is a project of the **Knowledge Network for Applied Educational Research** (www.knaer-recrae.ca)

Communities of practice in the KNSWB include: **Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, PREVNet, School Mental Health ASSIST, and the Social Planning Network of Ontario**

Other Research in Briefs can be found at
<http://oere.oise.utoronto.ca/>

KNAER-RECRAE is funded by the government of Ontario. The views expressed in this brief are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Ontario government.

Factors Impacting Success of School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs

Theories on why some suicide prevention programs may not work:

- They provide only information and education about suicide and depression
- They do not engage or involve parents
- They do not foster peer support
- They do not address concerns about confidentiality
- They are not long enough
- They do not have ongoing support from mental health services
- They do not incorporate resources outside of the school environment
- They do not address those who have previously attempted suicide

Programs that proactively plan to avoid these problems may be more likely to work than programs that do not address them.

Additionally, the authors of the review identified some elements that were linked to program effectiveness:

- Staff buy-in
- Recent incidence of suicide in school
- Use of multiple presentation methods
- Tailoring interventions for target groups
- Interventions that have been piloted and have a longer implementation history

These elements reflect the complex challenges of implementing programs in a variety of schools and settings.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers examined studies from a recently published systematic review on suicide prevention programs, and also conducted a search of 14 electronic databases. They restricted their search to interventions that were designed for suicide prevention and delivered in a school setting.

Rev. June 30, 2017

The authors identified nine primary studies that met their criteria; follow-ups of primary studies were also included. For each study, the authors identified aspects of the intervention that were linked to either positive or negative outcomes.

What did they learn?

The authors were able to identify some “key ingredients of success” in the studies they reviewed. As mentioned, programs with a clear connection between the theory of their effects and their activities may be more likely to work. In addition, programs may be more successful if they include features like peer and parental involvement/support, clear messages about confidentiality, ongoing partnerships with mental health providers in the community, and different strategies for individuals who have already attempted suicide.

For schools in rural areas where knowledge about suicide is lacking, or in areas with cultural taboos around suicide, education and awareness programs can be helpful. In urban areas with an increased awareness of suicide, these types of interventions may not be as helpful. In any case, interventions should always include a component covering how and where to access confidential support outside of school.

The researchers also determined that targeted interventions may benefit the following at-risk populations: students with poor attendance, those with poor academic performance, and those with substance abuse and behaviour problems.

Parent engagement, including providing parents with the tools to understand suicide and to assist them in talking with their children, was found to be a common factor linked to program effectiveness. Suicide prevention programs should also create partnerships with crisis services.

This brief summary was prepared from: Balaguru, V., Sharma, J., & Waheed, W. (2012). Review: Understanding the effectiveness of school-based interventions to prevent suicide: a realist review. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, September 2013.

Please see the original document for full details. In the case of any disagreement between this summary and the original document, the original document should be seen as authoritative.

