

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

The Effects of the Family Bereavement Program to Reduce Suicide Ideation and/or Attempts of Parentally Bereaved Children Six and Fifteen Years Later

Sandler, I., Tein, J. Y., Wolchik, S., & Ayers, T. S. (2016). The effects of the family bereavement program to reduce suicide ideation and/or attempts of parentally bereaved children six and fifteen years later. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 46(S1), S32-S38. doi:10.1111/12256

SUMMARY: Youth who experience the death of a parent may be at increased risk for later suicide. Parentally bereaved youth and their caregivers completed a Family Bereavement Program, which teaches youth coping skills and caregivers positive parenting skills; youth suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were compared with controls at six and 15-year follow-ups. Teaching positive parenting and child coping skills may reduce risk for bereaved youth's suicidal ideation or suicide attempts many years later.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Parental causes of death were illness (67%), accident (20%), and homicide or suicide (13%).
- The Family Bereavement Program decreased youth's suicidal ideation and suicide attempts marginally at the six-year follow-up and significantly at the 15-year follow-up.
- Approximately 10% of youth who received the Family Bereavement Program were prevented from experiencing suicidal ideation or suicide attempts across the 15-year follow-up period.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Facilitate support groups for families of deceased Service members to teach healthy coping skills
- Develop educational online modules for bereaved military family members who are parents to learn how to use positive parenting skills, even during bereavement

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military parents about the risk and protective factors for suicidal ideation and mental health disorders for youth who have experienced the death of a parent
- Offer workshops to military families to discuss when and where to find help for suicidal ideation or intent for themselves and their children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education of professionals (e.g., mental health workers, educators, childcare workers) about suicide risk among parentally bereaved military youth
- Continue to support programs that provide support groups, coping skills training, and mental health referrals for military families who have experienced the death of a Service member

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METHODS

- Youth who had experienced the death of a parent within the past three to 30 months were recruited through community schools, agencies, and media advertisements.
- Youth and caregivers were randomly assigned to the Family Bereavement Program, which taught positive parenting and effective coping skills, or the control group, which provided books and a study guide on grief.
- Youth and their caregivers in the Family Bereavement Program completed measures of youths' internalizing and externalizing problems, bereavement, and suicidal ideation and attempts.
- Treatment groups were compared on levels of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts at pre- and postintervention and at six-year and 15-year follow-ups (14% attrition).

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 244 youth (135 Family Bereavement Program, 109 control group), ages 8-16 years ($M = 11.39$, $SD = 2.43$) whose parent had died, and the youth's caregivers.
- Youth or caregivers who reported baseline suicidal ideation were excluded from the study.
- Participants identified as White (67%), Latino (16%), Black (7%), and "other" races (10%).

LIMITATIONS

- Measures of suicide plans or the duration or intensity of suicidal ideation were not included.
- Measures of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were combined and were only measured for the previous six months, decreasing clarity of results and potentially underestimating risk.
- Participants were excluded for suicidal ideation at baseline, limiting generalizability.
- Comparisons between control and treatment groups at pre- and post-intervention were not provided, and it is unclear whether groups had pre-existing differences at baseline.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the effectiveness of the Family Bereavement Program for military families and youth in reducing long-term suicide risk following a parent's death
- Examine potential pathways through which the Family Bereavement Program may impact later youth suicide risk, including environmental factors such as positive parenting
- Investigate whether positive parenting education improves parenting skills among bereaved spouses

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