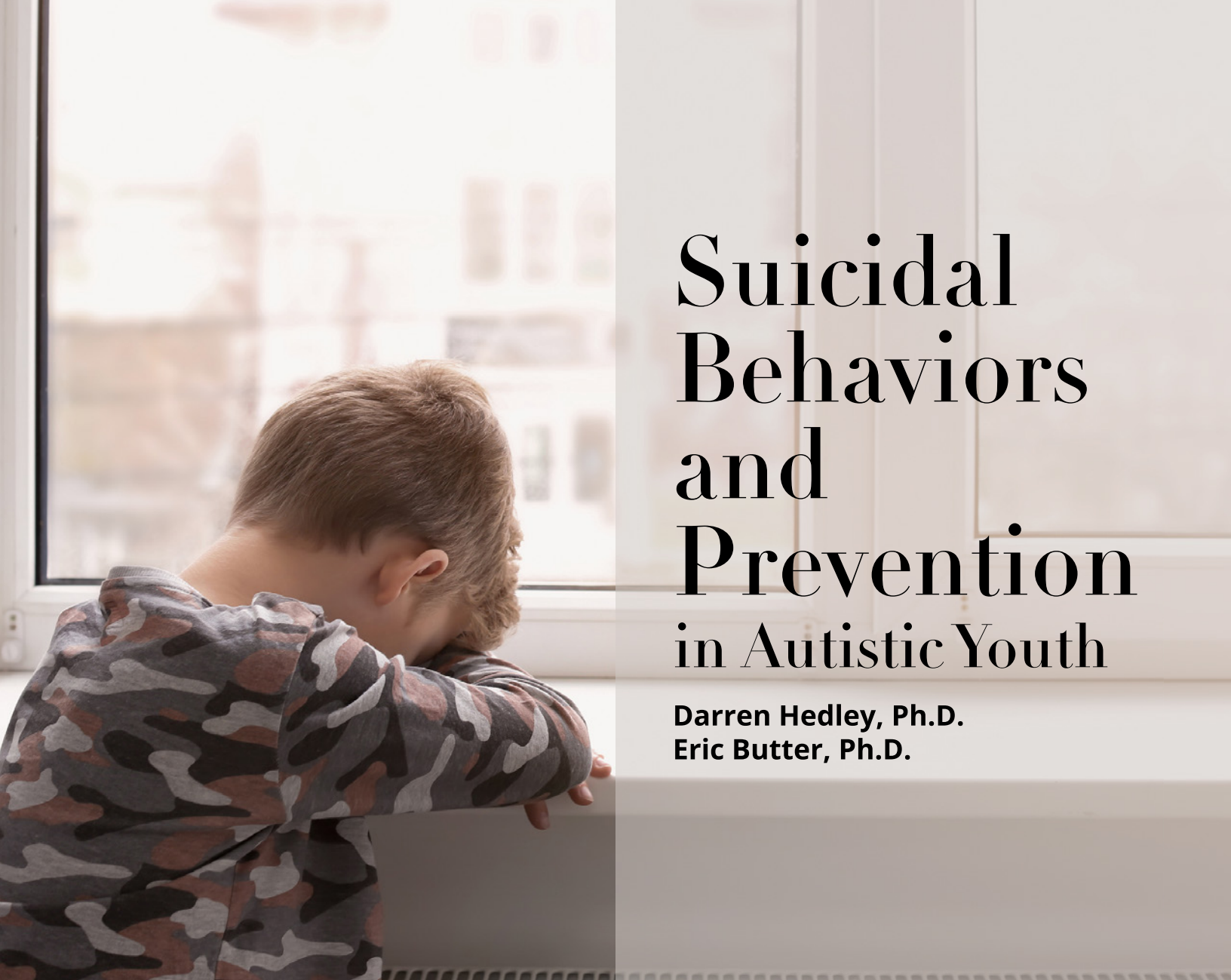




Suicidal Behaviors and Prevention in Autistic Youth

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Many people find talking about death and suicide to be very difficult. They may worry about potentially causing harm with the words they use on these topics, or fear that saying something in the wrong way will trigger thoughts of suicide. By talking about this very scary and lonely experience, we give those who are contemplating suicide the opportunity to share their feelings and realize that they are not alone. We can help others recognize that anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts are a part of life for many people, and that they can be managed with effective supports.

Autism and Suicide

The overall risk of suicide is about three times higher in autistic individuals than in the general population.¹ While this is lower than previous research had shown, it is still an elevated level in comparative terms. It is worth noting that the relative risk of suicide is higher for autistic females than it is for autistic males, which is the reverse of the trend in the general population in which the risk is higher in males.¹ More research is needed to determine why the risk of suicide is higher in autistic females. Other suicidal risk factors for autistic youth include childhood trauma, peer rejection and bullying, autistic burnout, and eating disorders. Non-cisgender identity may also increase vulnerability to suicide. It is important to acknowledge, however, that co-occurring mental health conditions such as depression underlie the prevalence of suicidal behavior in the autistic population.

Research shows that autistic children are attempting suicide at alarmingly young ages.² It appears that the age of about 10 is a particularly vulnerable period of time. It is when social relationships in school are becoming more complex, and friendship circles are being formed with many peers being left out of social groups. Parents need to be aware that even young children can engage in suicidal thoughts. For these reasons, the clinic at Nationwide Children's Hospital — where one of the authors of this article works — screens for suicide ideation starting at age ten.

Although the risk of suicide is relatively high in the autistic population, the number of autistic people who die by suicide remains low compared to other causes of premature death.^{3,4} While thoughts of suicide are relatively common, particularly in those who are also depressed, not all people who have thoughts of suicide go on to attempt suicide. However, when individuals display signs that might indicate they are thinking about suicide, it is important to act.

Common Signs of Suicidal Ideation



Expression of Suicidal Feelings

The signs that your child may be having thoughts of suicide are no different than what they would be in the general population, especially when it comes to autistic youth or adults who have verbal fluency and can talk about their feelings. These include talking about wanting to die or expressing strong feelings of guilt or shame. They may also see themselves as a burden on their friends and family.



Indirect Expression of Suicidal Ideation

Those who have a harder time talking about their feelings or using emotional vocabulary may take a less direct approach. It's important to pay attention to ways in which autistic individuals might describe their feelings. They may talk about feeling empty, hopeless or trapped, or they may express extreme sadness. They could talk about being full of rage or out of control, or express intense anxiety or agitation. In addition, they may say they feel overwhelmed or suffocated by their feelings in some way, or that they can't bear it anymore.



Behaviors

It is important to be able to identify behaviors that might indicate depression or suicidal ideation. Such behaviors could include:

- making a plan or researching how to die
- having a fixation or obsession with death themes
- withdrawing from friends
- saying goodbye to people
- writing a will
- taking unusual risks
- changes in routines and habits, such as eating and sleeping
- changes in patterns of alcohol and illicit drug use.

As clinicians, we would pay particular attention to the thoughts, feelings and changes in behavior listed above. We would encourage parents to pay attention to them as well.

The thoughts, feelings and changes in behavior listed above should all be closely monitored by clinicians and parents.

Reducing the Risk

Any approach to reducing the risk of suicidality in autistic youth must be multifaceted and multidimensional. The following are some common strategies that may help parents reduce the risk for their child.

Improve Coping Skills

While we all need coping skills to get through life, the typical ways that we learn them may not be available to many autistic individuals. How does your child cope with challenges of modern living? Take a proactive approach to building coping skills, and seek assistance from a professional when needed.

Build Supportive Relationships

Ensure that your child has supportive relationships. A significant issue for suicidal autistic adults is social isolation. It is cause for concern when such individuals do not have anyone they trust or feel comfortable talking to. People need to feel supported and understood, and this happens when they have someone who will listen to them and not dismiss them. A significant part of building wellness and healthy living for children as they move to young adulthood is to make sure they have a friend. Create opportunities for your child to build friendships. Since social challenges are at the heart of autism, it is vital that parents make creating meaningful social connections and building supportive relationships a priority.

Listen

Listen to children when they want to talk. Don't judge or dismiss their feelings. Children want and need to talk about these difficult things. Educate yourself on how to respond appropriately during these intense conversations. To learn more about conversations of suicide, go to the following website: **The Suicide Response Project.** (<https://www.suicideresponseproject.com/>)

Advocate

Parents need to advocate for evidence-based care in their community. We know that suicide risk is real for some autistic individuals. Many may think about harming themselves or believe that suicide is a potential solution for their pain. When family, friends and communities recognize that these individuals are not just sad or feeling down, they can help provide a safe space for caring conversations about mental health.

Provide Resources

Make sure that you and your teen or young adult know how to access support when it is needed. This includes the 9-8-8 Suicide and Crisis Toll-free hotline in the US, the Talk Suicide Canada Hotline at 1-833-456-4566, as well as local community hotlines or crisis centers. The American Association of Suicidology provides autism resources, including autism-specific suicide prevention toolkits. (<https://suicidology.org/resources/autism-resources/>)

If you suspect that your child is thinking of doing something to hurt or harm him or herself, take the risk seriously. Do not leave your child unsupervised. Seek help immediately.

If you suspect thoughts of suicide but feel your child is not at immediate risk, consider taking the following steps.

GET HELP

You can't do this alone. Get help from wherever you can. If possible, schedule an appointment with your pediatrician that day or go to a mental health or crisis center. Access someone who is qualified and competent to help.

SECURE RISKY ENVIRONMENTS

If you suspect suicidal thoughts or if there is a history of suicidal behavior in your autistic child or teen, secure your environment to make sure it's safe. Limit access to lethal means of self-harm, such as firearms or pills. Although this is not a long-term solution, it is something you can do when you suspect your child may be entertaining suicidal thoughts.

SEEK A THERAPIST

Cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be effective for managing suicidal ideation. The core components of this therapy are to train the brain away from negative thinking and to build coping skills for difficult and stressful environments and situations. Find a therapist who has experience working with young people who are autistic since the strategies may differ from those used with neurotypical individuals.

DESIGN A SAFETY PLAN

Design a safety plan with the help of a professional. Immediate intervention for suicide is focused on eliminating lethal means of self-harm and engaging patients in identifying and implementing tools that will reduce their suicidal urges immediately. The strategies for reducing future risk, however, should be part of a safety plan. The plan should include a list of ways in which your child can be safe in other environments. It can be a written or a pictorial plan, depending on the child's preference. It could include a social story that shows what to do if he or she gets into a crisis again. It is important for the plan to identify supportive people who can be called upon in a crisis. It should also include plans to see a therapist, hotline numbers in order to speak with someone, and strategies to build coping skills and supportive relationships.

ROLE-PLAY

Role-play a crisis situation with your youth. Ask your child to imagine what it's like to be in a crisis, and then role-play exactly what actions to take. This can include ways to get mom's attention or reaching out to a trusted adult at school when having suicidal thoughts. Play out scenarios so your child will know exactly how to manage his or her next crisis.

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The key takeaway for parents from this article is to **listen** to their child's story and to not dismiss it. Do not see your child's actions and words as manipulative or attention-seeking, and don't react with negative emotions such as anger or fear. Sit with your child and listen. Focus on building a positive attitude and fostering a spirit of optimism. Be a good role model of positivity. Help your teen want to live and not feel the need to die. Connect your autistic child or youth with other autistic individuals who are successfully living with autism. Do all that you can to create hope.

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We acknowledge and remember all persons who have been lost to us because of suicide, as well as the people left behind. We acknowledge the enduring suffering that suicide brings, and the complex emotions and experiences of all people who have contemplated suicide. We acknowledge that those with lived experience can provide hope, resilience and support to those at risk.



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R U OKAY

A conversation could change a life — inspire and empower everyone to meaningfully connect with the people around them and start a conversation with those in their world who may be struggling with life.

<https://www.ruok.org.au/>

The Suicide Response Project

The Suicide Response Project

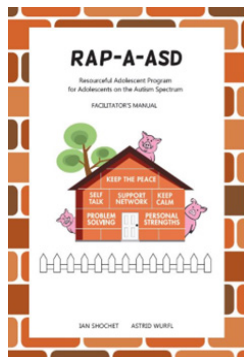
A free website for family and friends to learn skills about what to say and what to do when they have suicidal concerns about a family member. We know that a large portion of suicidal people reach out to family, friends and the community, and it is important for them to know how to have these conversations.

<https://www.suicideresponseproject.com/>



American Association of Suicidology Autism Resources and Toolkits

<https://suicidology.org/resources/autism-resources/>



Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP)

Building resilience and promoting positive mental health in teenagers

<https://www.rap.qut.edu.au/>

ON OUR SLEEVES

The Movement for Children's Mental Health

On Our Sleeves

On Our Sleeves is the national movement to break stigmas around children's mental health. No family should struggle alone on their journey. Their mission is to provide free mental health educational resources to every community in America to educate families and empower advocates

<https://www.onoursleeves.org/>



Orygen

Working directly with young people, their families and friends, Orygen pioneers new, positive approaches to the prevention and treatment of mental disorders. They advocate, educate and are dedicated to seeing young people with mental ill-health getting well and staying well.

<https://www.orygen.org.au/>