

The 'choking game,' psychological distress and bullying

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Ontario's youth are experiencing a different kind of high -- approximately seven percent (an estimated 79,000 students in grades 7 to 12) report participating in a thrill-seeking activity called the "choking game", which involves self-asphyxiation or having been choked by someone else on purpose. The 2007 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) revealed these new data, as well as indicators and trends on the psychological health of Ontario's youth, in the Mental Health and Well-Being Report released today by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) for Children's Mental Health Week.

Other new topics in the 2007 OSDUHS showed that approximately three percent (or 35,000 students) reported a suicide attempt in the past year. About one in ten students rate their mental health as poor, with females more likely to do so than males (16 percent versus 7 percent). About nine percent of students may have a video gaming problem (indicated by symptoms such as loss of control, withdrawal, and disruption to family or school), with males significantly more likely than females to indicate this problem (16 percent versus 3 percent).

As Dr. Jürgen Rehm, senior scientist at CAMH and study spokesperson, explains, "We included questions on the choking game and video gaming to reflect the ever changing behavioural patterns of young Ontarians. Overall, the results are not alarming, but indicate that Ontario youth overall show a relatively high degree of distress and potentially self-harming behavior."

Dr. David Wolfe, director of CAMH's Centre for Prevention Science notes that adolescents have always had a fascination with altered states. "Activities such as the choking game are not new, but it is important that parents are aware of these behaviours and are prepared to speak with their children about the dangers of these and other risky activities."

This year's report also shows a stable but high rate of elevated psychological distress, with 31 percent of students reporting symptoms of depression, anxiety or social dysfunction. In addition, about 21 percent of students visited a mental health professional a least once during the past year. This is a significant increase from 2005, when only 12 percent of students reported visits.

"This is an encouraging sign," commented Dr. Rehm, "as it shows, that psychological and mental health problems are less stigmatized, and students and their families become increasingly aware that professional services can help overcome these problems."

Bullying continues to be a problem with Ontario youth, with stable but elevated rates of approximately 30 percent of students reporting being bullied at school since September. The most prevalent form of being bullied is verbal attacks (23 percent), while four percent are bullied physically, and three percent are usually victims of theft or vandalism.

The report points to the key role parents and teachers play in the development of adolescents. "Bullying continues to be a problem in our schools and can have significant effects on the mental health and well-being of adolescents," says Dr. Wolfe. "It is crucial that schools find ways to address these forms of abuse and violence, so that students feel safe. Young people need to know that the lines of communication are open and they can speak to school administrators and parents about their problems. And similarly, parents need to be open and honest with kids and arm them with the necessary tools to make healthy decisions."

Source: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

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