

Program helps high school students overcome depression and thoughts of suicide

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A suicide prevention program developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center has significantly helped teens overcome depression and thoughts of suicide, according to a new study.

The study, published in the September 2011 edition of the *Journal of School Health*, shows that students who have gone through the program, Surviving the Teens, are significantly less likely to report that they are considering [suicide](#), planning suicide or have attempted suicide than before participating in the program.

The study, conducted by Keith King, PhD, a professor at the University of Cincinnati College of Education, [Criminal Justice](#) and Human Services, will be published online Aug. 11 and in the print edition Aug. 16.

"The overwhelming majority of students felt Surviving the Teens helped them to learn suicide warning signs, suicide and depression [risk factors](#), how to effectively cope with stress, steps to take if they or a friend felt suicidal, and how to talk to their parents and friends about their problems," says Cathy Strunk, RN, suicide prevention expert in the division of Psychiatry at Cincinnati Children's who developed Surviving the Teens.

The program is one of the few [suicide prevention](#) programs to have data supporting its effectiveness.

Strunk taught the Surviving the Teens curriculum to more than 6,000 [high school students](#) in Warren, Butler and Hamilton counties during the 2008-2009 [school year](#). For this study, more than 900 were surveyed before going through the program and after completing the program. More than 400 were surveyed three months later.

Among the findings in self-reported behaviors, feelings, intentions and attitudes three months following the program compared to pre-test:

- Students who reported considering suicide decreased 65 percent, from 4.2 percent of students to 1.5 percent.
- Students who reported planning to attempt suicide decreased 48 percent, from 9.9 percent of students to 5.2 percent.
- Students who reported having attempted suicide decreased 67 percent, from 5.2 percent of students to 1.7 percent.
- Students who reported feeling sad and hopeless decreased 26 percent, from 22.6 percent of students to 16.8 percent.

"The program taught students how to have more self-confidence and how to engage in positive behavior, which lessens the risk of them contemplating suicide," says Strunk.

The survey administered immediately after completing the program showed that:

- Nearly 72 percent of students intended to talk more to their parents about their problems, nearly 81 percent intended to talk to their friends more about their problems, and nearly 90 percent intended to encourage their friends to talk more to them about their problems.
- Students' knowledge of depression risk factors suicide risk factors, and suicide warning signs increased significantly.
- Students' intent to seek help when suicidal increased.

"This study focused on students' self-reporting, so it is unclear how closely their feelings and attitudes mirror actual behavior," says Michael Sorter, MD, director of Psychiatry at Cincinnati Children's and study co-author. "This is something we need to look at in the future. Even though we don't claim that Surviving the Teens is the answer to suicidal behavior, we are very encouraged by the research so far indicating how helpful the program might be."

Strunk and the division of Psychiatry at Cincinnati Children's created Surviving the Teens to provide information, resources and support to help guide teens and families through the ups and downs of life. The curriculum focuses on educating students about the [warning signs](#) of suicide in either themselves or friends and how they can get help if they or their friends have suicidal feelings. The program includes a component called Steps to Last™, which assists students in understanding what steps they need to take if they, their friends or family members need help.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide is the third leading cause of death in children ages 15-24.

Provided by Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

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