



Choking Game and Other Risky Behaviors

The Facts

Pre-adolescents, adolescents and college-age students are prone to experimentation, often for behaviors that are risky to their health. It is most common among children ages 9 to 14. Games that restrict oxygen supply to the brain are not uncommon. One study in Oregon found that 6% of all eighth graders in 2009 had participated in just one form of this activity at least once. Other studies show a prevalence as high as 11% of youth.

The “Choking Game” is one of the most dangerous versions of this game because the youth applies a tie or belt around his/her neck, restricting flow of oxygen and blood to the brain. Hyperventilating is another version. Putting pressure on one’s own neck or chest (or on the chest of a friend) are other versions.

Lightheadedness comes with the activity when oxygen (and sometimes blood flow too) are restricted. This is followed by a “high” or euphoric feeling when the restriction is released and oxygen and blood are permitted to reenter the brain. Some children faint. Many adults would find these feelings unwelcomed, but at this age, youth find that the alteration of their consciousness as intriguing.

The Dangers

There are few studies that have documented long term dangers to these activities. Repeated deprivations of the brain of its oxygen are known to cause disability, and this is one concern. However, in the short term, traumatic injury to a child’s neck and injury when the child falls (especially while having a tie around his/her neck) are well documented. Retinal damage to the eyes has been documented. The Centers for Disease Control reported in 2012 that there were 82 accidental deaths from the choking game in children between the ages of 6 and 19.

Prevention

Information and education are the only ways to prevent injury and death from these activities. Parents, teachers, school nurses and counselors, doctors, and others who spend time with children this age, need to warn of the serious consequences. Parents of children who have died, retrospectively remember seeing ties and belts tied to bed posts, and wish they had recognized these as warning signs that their children may be practicing these activities. These “games” tend to occur in clusters, sweeping a school or club over a period of weeks. At these times, it is most important to inform and educate our youth.