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## ***What Makes Kids Kill Themselves?***

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth fifteen to nineteen years of age. The suicide rate for youth in the United States has tripled in the last twenty years; approximately 5,000 young people succeed in taking their lives each year. In addition, for every successful suicide, fifty to sixty are attempted. This means that every year in the United States 250,000 to 300,000 youth attempt to kill themselves.

"Suicidal Adolescents: Factors in Evaluation" written by Maria Gispert, Kirk Wheeler, Lorelee Marsh and Maryellen Davis, appeared in the Winter 1985 issue of *Adolescence*. The authors examined 82 adolescents, ages 12 to 18, who had been admitted to a large metropolitan general hospital for attempting suicide. Elements which contributed to their suicide attempts were examined, and six of particular interest were identified:

1. *Family structure.* 49 percent of the youth lived in one-parent homes.

Only 20 percent lived with both natural parents. 46 percent came from families with four or more children.

2. *School enrollment.* 80 percent of the youth were enrolled in school, although nearly half of that 80 percent were usually truant or not attending at all. Only 49 percent were at their appropriate grade level.

3. *Favored method.* The most frequent method attempted was drug overdose (71 percent). The seriousness of the overdose ranged from 25 percent mild to 15 percent life-threatening.

4. *Lethality of attempt.* 13 percent of the adolescents made the least lethal attempts at suicide. 21 percent made probably nonlethal attempts (mild overdose of over-the-counter drugs). 39 percent made injurious but nonlethal attempts (wrist lacerations or moderate overdose). And 22 percent committed probably lethal attempts (jumping or serious ingestion). Only four of the youth (5 percent) made clearly lethal attempts (hanging or gunshot). Most of the attempts (78 percent), regardless of the severity, took place either in the actual presence of others or where the youth was likely to be discovered. There was a confusing lack of correlation between lethality and probability of rescue.

5. *Continued suicide risk.* Within 24 hours of admission to the hospital, 24 percent of the patients denied ever having suicidal intentions. 27 percent acknowledged that they had wished to kill themselves at the time but no longer wished to do so. 30 percent admitted to attempting suicide and remained ambivalent about repeat attempts. 19 percent admitted their attempts and still wished to die.

6. *Life stress.* 40 percent of the attempts were spurred by identifiable events (e.g., argument with a parent,

breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend). The adolescents as a general group had experienced a high number of major life stressors in their lifetime, more so in the preceding year, and especially in the preceding months.