

Parents learn about suicide

Suicide

It's not rising among children, CDC says

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About 150 parents and staff members in the Penfield Central School District met Thursday night for a frank discussion about a topic that seldom receives such a public hearing: children dying by suicide.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide among children is not on the rise. The prevalence of social media, however, means young people and their families are more likely to learn about the tragedies that do occur.

Superintendent Thomas Putnam began the evening by acknowledging: "It's not a question of whether it's going to happen in your district, it's when it's going to happen. It's a fact of life."

It – suicide – has happened recently in Penfield, as it has in other districts. Sarah Clark, the Western New York Director of American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, gave a presentation Thursday describing warning signs and preventative measures.

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SARAH CLARK

AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

She pointed to studies showing 17 percent of young people reported having considered suicide in the last year, and 8 percent reported having made an attempt. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among young people in the United States.

The most important takeaway for parents, she said, is the need for clear communication with their children. That means parents should talk with their kids about mental health just as they do about grades, sports, drugs or sex – and more importantly, listen to what their children say.

"A lot of kids will say, 'I'm going to kill myself,' and you think, are they just being dramatic? Do they just want attention?" Clark said. "From tonight forward, you have to take every statement seriously."

Besides being open to what their children say, parents should also keep tabs on them proactively, including

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monitoring their online activity and setting limits to internet or cellphone use, Clark said.

The district is implementing a program called “More Than Sad,” intended to open the way for students to recognize when they or someone else needs help, and to ask for it. There is also training in best practices for adults in schools. “We know there’s a lot of stressors and outside pressures in life,” Putnam said. “We’ve got kids from our teeniest kindergartners to the ones ready to go off to college or career, and they all need our support.” The large crowd Thursday showed the interest in learning more about what is often considered a taboo topic. And among 150 people, there surely were some with their own personal experience with suicide.

One of them was Ann Diamond, the mother of a 15-year-old son. Her brother died by suicide in 2007, and it took time before she was able to talk about it with her son or anyone else. “It’s rampant, but people don’t want to talk about it,” she said. “It’s like it’s shrouded in shame. ... But the more you talk about it, the more you realize how many people are affected. We need to talk about it.”

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