

Beware the Choking Game
Doris Holmstrom, Guest columnist

It's time to add another page to the parenting manual: Beware the Choking Game.

Teens and tweens now are choking themselves to get “high” without benefit of drugs. In groups, they choke each other using their hands or arms. Alone they use nooses made of everything from dog leashes to computer cables tied to furniture, doorknobs, closet rods. The effect is to temporarily cut blood flow to the brain. The high comes when pressure is released and blood rushes back.

What players of this Brain Roulette—one of the game's many other names—don't know is that it can kill them, disable them for life, even land them in jail, if a friend is hurt or dies at their hands. The CDC says it takes only seconds for a child to pass out and three minutes for brain damage to occur, if pressure isn't released in time. When no one is there to intervene, death follows shortly.

“It was one of the scariest things I'd ever heard of,” said school nurse Pam Durbin—scary because there is no safe way to play. “Anytime you pass out, it means you're getting inadequate oxygen to the brain and your body shuts down.”

Health officials point to children whose eyesight suffered as a result of playful strangulation, who suffered heart attacks, strokes and seizures, broken bones and concussions from falling after passing out, and those who fell into comas. What seems difficult for them to tally is the number of deaths attributable to the game;

10 signs of choking:

1. Bloodshot eyes, headaches, earaches, hoarseness
2. Marks on necks or spots on faces
3. Cuts or bruises from falling after passing out
4. Dressing to hide their necks
5. Locked or blocked doors
6. Behavioral changes, or disorientation after being alone
7. Thudding sounds, or wear marks on furniture
8. Conversations about strangulation or the game
9. Knots or nooses in their rooms
10. Internet searches for the Choking Game

many are thought to have been incorrectly ruled suicides.

G.A.S.P., a non-profit dedicated to ending the Choking Game, puts this country's game-related death total at 18 so far this year, but estimates run much higher. Among those claimed by the game was a 14-year-old Michigan girl who'd just started high school.

Her mother said, "We actually brought my daughter to the ER the Friday before she passed away, because she had developed strange spots along her jawline that we could not explain." Both the ER and pediatrics staffs "were unable to identify signs of asphyxiation," she said. "Six days later, she was gone."

That some healthcare workers missed the clues isn't surprising to Durbin. She said, "In our continuing education for nurses, it's not a topic." The game has been making headlines for years, but usually only in reaction to deaths. The only sure way of saving lives is stopping the game.

Here's what experts advise:

- Acknowledge that even the most intelligent, well-adjusted children are at risk. Part of the game's appeal is that it's free and legal.
- Keep an eye on your kids. Watch for signs that they may be choking. (See inset.)
- Ask their siblings, and encourage other adults to watch for those same signs and intervene on your behalf.
- Take advantage of the resources available online and elsewhere.
- Talk to your kids about the Choking Game, just as about substance abuse and the other dangers facing them today. Warn them of the risks.
- Learn CPR, so you know how to respond in a worst-case scenario.

Help make this the last Choking Game story needed.

© Michigan Health Sciences Library Association (MHSLA)