

The “Choking Game”

What You Should Know

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Far West Family Services Employee Assistance Programs

What is the choking game?

The “choking game” is a dangerous and often deadly activity that involves deliberately cutting off the supply of oxygen to the brain. Kids do it to themselves and to each other. This so-called “game” is also known as, blackout, space monkey, flat liner, tingling, and suffocating roulette. Often kids use belts, ropes, their own bare hands, sheets, bicycle chains and other objects with the intent to cause a temporary loss of consciousness. This activity impacts the nervous system and deprives the brain of oxygen. The desired result is two-fold.

First, there is a light-headed, dizzy feeling and then there is a “rush” as

the pressure is removed and there is a powerful surge of blood rushing to the brain. Kids who have been interviewed about this activity describe the feeling as “cool” or as a “high”. The sensation is considered pleasurable and can become addictive.

What are the risks?

This activity is very risky and can cause permanent brain damage and in many cases, death. Brain cells are extremely sensitive to oxygen deprivation. Some brain cells actually start dying less than 5 minutes after their oxygen supply is cut. As a result, temporary choking can cause death or severe brain damage rapidly. As youth become

drawn to or addicted to this “high” they are more tempted to engage in the activity alone. The incidents that have been fatal have been when a child has engaged in the choking game alone and then passed out before they were able to release the pressure. Because of the lack of visibility for adults surrounding this activity, these deaths are often mislabeled as suicide.

Who is at risk?

The most common age for playing this game is between the ages of 9 and 14, middle school and early high

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school aged kids. Boys and girls both engage in this activity. It is important to differentiate the “choking game” from suicidal or intentional self-injurious behavior. This activity is considered a “thrill-seeking” activity and kids engage in it to achieve a pleasurable feeling, not with any intent to harm and usually without full knowledge of the risk they are taking. Because it is done for pleasure not self-harm, many children, not just those we think of as typically at risk, are vulnerable to engaging in this risky behavior. This age range is a time when kids are learning more about their bodies and about the world and want to experiment with new things, without a full understanding of the possible risks and consequences.

What are the warning signs?

There are signs to watch for to determine if a child might be engaging in self-asphyxiation activity:

- Marks or bruises on the neck
- Complaining of headaches
- Bloodshot eyes
- Belts or ropes with unusual knots in your child’s bedroom
- Frequently spending time behind closed doors
- Outbursts of anger, mood swings

While some of these signs may be a normal part of adolescence or point to other types of behavior, the important thing is to be aware of the possibility that a child might be playing the choking game. Keeping this issue in your awareness will help you to avoid missing important signs.

What can we do about it?

The most important thing that parents and people working with kids can do is to be aware of the warning signs, intervene when they have a concern, and educate students about the risks involved with this activity.

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Tips:

- Pay attention, watch for the signs.
- Listen for subtle clues that a child may be asking for help.
- Ask straightforward questions: "Have you or any of your friends ever played the choking game?" or "What do you know about the choking game?" or "Why do you think someone might want to play the choking game?" Sometimes initial questions that allow the child to talk about "other people" may create safety to begin a conversation that can lead to information about their own behavior once they test your reaction. It is important to react in a calm and nonjudgmental manner to encourage further disclosure.
- Provide information; educate kids about the risks. Tell them, "This is not a game. When you cut off oxygen to your brain you are damaging it permanently and you can die from it."
- Encourage kids to tell an adult if they are worried about a friend.
- Assure kids that they can safely ask for help without fear of punishment.
- Don't be afraid to talk about this with the kids – You won't cause them to try it, but you may prevent them from taking the risk or find out if they already need help.
- Trust your gut instincts.
- Refer children to school counseling staff.

- If you hear kids talking about this game (listen for any of the other terms used to describe it) stop and use it as a teachable moment and/or give their names to the school's counseling department for follow-up.
- If a child writes about this activity in a journal or assignment, follow-up, talk about it or make a counseling referral.
- Don't minimize or talk yourself out of concern because a child is a "good" kid, not typically someone with behavioral or academic issues.
- If you have concerns and don't know what to do – ask for help from your school counselor or a medical professional.

Thrill-seeking behavior – Healthy alternatives

Like most other potentially dangerous or addictive behaviors, there is an underlying motivator when people play the "choking game". Because of that, simply warning kids of the danger and telling them to stop may not be enough. It is critical to provide them with healthy alternatives, so that when the motivation or desire occurs, they have another method of responding. If we don't provide a replacement tool or behavior, children are likely to continue engaging in the activity that they know will give them the desired effect. For example, if a child is engaging in the game due to peer pressure, he/she may need support around developing healthy boundaries, learning how to say "no", or improving self-esteem. If the motivat-

ing factor is the "thrill" or "high", work with the student and family to engage the student in healthy activities that also can create an emotional and/or physical "rush". Some examples of these alternatives are:

- Rock climbing
- Skate boarding
- Bungee jumping
- Sports or extreme sports
- Debate team, public speaking
- Drama club or other performance activities
- Running
- Hiking
- Water skiing, wake boarding or snow skiing
- Rides at fairs or carnivals

While there is risk inherent in many of these activities, the difference is that adults can be involved to ensure youth are taught to follow appropriate safety guidelines and wear protective equipment. These activities can also help facilitate healthy peer relationships.

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