

Risky Business: The Choking Game

We know that the teen years are marked by risk taking behaviors. Teens experiment with attitudes, appearances, and new behaviors. While most of it is harmless, some experiments can have tragic results.

One risky behavior that can backfire involves young people trying to get a rush, or get high by choking themselves or their friends. Children and youth—usually in middle school and early high school—try it alone or with others. They do it for the perceived high that occurs as oxygen rushes back to the brain—putting the player at high risk for nerve damage, even death. Sound dangerous? It is. The challenge of losing consciousness and reviving is known by many names, including: “pass-out, cloud nine, tingling, blackout, choking game, suffocation roulette, space monkey, the fainting game” and other names in different areas of the country.

The Game That Kills. The United States began tracking the choking deaths of youths between the ages of 6 and 19 in 1995. An accurate count is difficult to establish because many of these deaths are reported as suicides. Some estimates place the number of choking deaths between 250 and 1,000 each year. Most players who die alone are male, with an average age of 13. More than 90 percent of those who died had parents who were unaware of the game. A yearly Canadian survey of Ontario school districts found that 7 percent of students in grades 7 to 12, or 79,000 kids, have played the game.

The game usually involves two children. When the child being choked starts to lose consciousness, due to lack of oxygen, the second releases the pressure, allowing the blood to rush to the brain. Keeping oxygen from the brain can cause permanent loss of brain functions such as concentration, memory, and even death.

Kids don't know it kills. Some kids play because of peer pressure. Others receive a dare, a challenge, or a defined rite of passage that allows them into a social group. Some youths play because of the belief that choking can induce a quick 5-10 second sensation of euphoria. Still others are trying to find a cheap high. *But it's not.*

The children who play are, more often than not, well-adjusted, high-achieving students looking to have a sensational experience. What is clear is that most children who play the game do not understand the risks to their health or the possibility of death. Even when a person survives, thousands of brain cells have been killed.

Look for the warning signs. The following signs may indicate your child or his or her friends are thinking about or playing the choking game.

If your child has:

- Questions about the effects, sensations, or dangers of strangulation;
- Changes in personality, such as being angry or irritated, or unusual demands for privacy;

Complaints of headaches (sometimes very bad ones), loss of concentration, a flushed face, or tiny red dots on the face;
Bloodshot eyes or any other noticeable signs of stress on the eyes;
Any suspicious mark on the side of the neck, sometimes hidden by a turtleneck, a scarf, or a turned-up collar.

If you notice:

Any kind of strap (including bed sheets, belts, t-shirts, ropes) tied in strange knots and/or found in unusual places, or laying near the child without any reason—and a child avoids answering questions about such objects;
A thud in the bedroom or against a wall—which could mean a fall if a child is alone and choking himself;
Locked or blocked bedroom/bathroom doors;
Wear marks on furniture such as bunk beds or closet rods;
Your child's Internet history of web sites or chat rooms that mention asphyxiation or choking.

If you suspect your child or a friend is playing the choking game, supervise him or her very closely. Dispose of items that could be used for this purpose. Seek professional counseling and support for your child and your family.

Learn the Facts. Children and youth are often curious about risky behaviors. They may wrongly think that the choking game is a safe alternative to drinking or trying other substances such as pot or prescription drugs.

Your child might hear about classmates who play the choking game or even know some friends who play. When your child talks about it with you, listen and take time to give your child the facts to counter any myths.

One myth is that choking provides a harmless high. In actuality, the “high” is the cells of the brain seizing and beginning the process of permanent cell death. When a person becomes unconscious, pressure is released and the secondary “high” of the oxygen/blood rushing to the brain is achieved. The fact is that pressure on the neck cuts off blood to the brain and causes unconsciousness and possibly death.

Make Sure Your Loved Ones Understand the Risks. Talk to the children in your life. Make sure they understand why the game is so dangerous. Pointing out the dangers—as well as your concern for his or her safety—may help your child avoid experimenting with these high-risk “games.”

If you have difficulty speaking to your teen about it, you may want to bring up the subject as part of a more comprehensive discussion about drinking alcohol or using illicit substances.

You also may want to talk to your child's school about “choking” to make sure they're watching for warning signs among students. School systems across the country are increasingly more aware of the problem and developing public education for counselors, teachers, parents, and students. We know that many local schools have been proactive in educating on this serious

issue but don't wait for the school to take action; your child's safety is your responsibility. Become an educated and involved parent by helping your children understand the dangers of choking.

The above information was adapted from SAMHSA's Family Guide to Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy & Drug Free. For more resources about the choking game, parenting resources and healthful activities for your family visit their web site at <http://www.family.samhsa.gov>.

The above information clearly illustrates that "space monkey" and its counterparts are high risk behaviors that we need to protect our children from. Know the facts. Talk to your children, listen to their concerns and monitor their behaviors. Research shows that kids who learn about drug risks from their parents are half as likely to use drugs as kids who haven't had that conversation with mom and dad. For more information about how to talk with your kids about prevention contact the CADY office at 536-9793 or visit our web site at www.cadyinc.org.

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