FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 / (618) 462-5415

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TEENAGE SUICIDE

The rash of teenage suicides in affluent New York suburbs this year has dramatized and publicized a growing national phenomenon. The teen suicide rate has risen 300 percent in the last 20 years and become the second leading cause of death, after accidents.

Every day, 18 young Americans kill themselves. Every hour 57 teenagers attempt suicide. Even these numbers are deceptively low. A death is not recorded as a suicide unless there is proof, such as a suicide note, that the suicide was intentional.

But only 15 percent of suicides leave notes. For every successful teenage suicide, at least 50 and probably as many as 200 adolescents attempt suicide.

Since the recent suicides in Westchester County, New York, many articles have appeared speculating on the reasons for the high suicide rate and seeking correlations with other factors. White males have the highest rate, followed by black males, white females, and black females, in that order.

There is no correlation between suicide and poverty; indeed, there is some evidence that the correlation is between teenage suicide and well-to-do, career-oriented parents. Suicides are the lowest among Hispanics, despite their significant poverty.

Dr. Eva Deykin, a suicide epidemiologist at the Harvard School of Public Health, notes that the increase in teenage suicides coincides with the dramatic increase in divorce and the frequent movement of families around the country.

Dr. Michael L. Peck, psychologist consultant to the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center, says that "a close, involved, loving family is the best overall suicide prevention factor." When parents are "afraid to set rules and enforce them," he says, "a feeling that they can do anything they want is terrifying to kids."

The increased use of alcohol and drugs by teenagers and the easy availability of firearms all coincide with the rise in suicides. Experts believe that these factors are not a cause of suicide but only aggravate the underlying cause, such as depression or loss of self-esteem.

Psychiatrist Dr. Mary Giffin and writer Carol Felsenthal, who collaborated on a book on this subject called "A Cry for Help," analyzed the large number of teenage suicides in suburban Chicago and concluded that the escalating rate has much to do with the widespread movement of mothers out of the home and into the labor force. Nearly every one of the more than one hundred suicidal teenagers they interviewed had suffered a break in the mother-infant bonding.

A suicidal impulse can be engrained within the first few months of life. Breaking up with a girlfriend, failing a chemistry exam, or being bounced from the athletic team, can all precipitate a suicide try. But if the child has the emotional stability which results from a strong bonding with his mother in his first years of life, he will probably survive.

The child who has a strong bond with his mother can survive nearly any blow that adolescence may bring; the child who doesn't sometimes can't survive.

Women's magazines constantly assure mothers that raising children depends on "quality time" not the quantity of the time she spends with her children. Articles sneer condescendingly at the housewife in the home, suggesting that she must not be too bright if she is at her baby's beck-and-call 24 hours a day.

Mrs. Felsenthal points out that, with so many mothers now seeking their own careers instead of fulfilling the traditional role of motherhood, many children end up losing twice. Instead of having an anchoring mother, they are "cast adrift with a preoccupied-with-business father and a preoccupied-with-business mother."

There have always been absent, uninvolved fathers but, in prior times, for most children, Mom could always be depended on, no matter what. Mrs. Felsenthal concluded that the feminist movement "seems to have left us with mothers who are striving to be more like fathers, with fathers who are as inattentive as they have always been, and with children who are left out in the emotional cold."

Mother-baby bonding has often been described as magic. But, Mrs. Felsenthal says, "there's nothing magic about it. Like most things worthwhile, bonding takes time, patience, and just plain devotion. It is a cumulative process that requires consistency of care; and consistency means one person sticking with the child full time for the first five years of his life. And that's years, not months."