Parent-adolescent Agreement About Adolescents' Suicidal Thoughts

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OBJECTIVES: To examine agreement between parent and adolescent reports of adolescents' suicidal thoughts and explore demographic and clinical factors associated with agreement in a large community sample. METHODS: Participants included 5137 adolescents 11 to 17 years old (52.1% girls; 43.0% racial minority) and a collateral informant (97.2% parent or stepparent) from the Philadelphia Neurodevelopmental Cohort. Families were recruited from a large pediatric health care network. Adolescents and parents completed a clinical interview that included questions about adolescents' lifetime suicidal thoughts. RESULTS: Agreement was moderate for thoughts of killing self (? = 0.466) and low for thoughts of death or dying (? = 0.171). Discrepancies stemmed from both parental unawareness of suicidal thoughts reported by adolescents and adolescent denial of suicidal thoughts reported by parents. Fifty percent of parents were unaware of adolescents' thoughts of killing themselves, and 75.6% of parents were unaware of adolescents' recurrent thoughts of death. Forty-eight percent of adolescents denied thoughts of killing themselves, and 67.5% of adolescents denied thoughts of death reported by parents. Several demographic (eg, age) and clinical (eg, treatment history) characteristics were associated with agreement. CONCLUSIONS**:** Early identification and intervention hinge on reliable and valid assessment of suicide risk. The high prevalence of parental unawareness and adolescent denial of suicidal thoughts found in this study suggests that many adolescents at risk for suicide may go undetected. These findings have important clinical implications for pediatric settings, including the need for a multi-informant approach to suicide screening and a personalized approach to assessment based on empirically derived risk factors for unawareness and denial.

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