

## The Choking “Game” It’s No Game: It’s Deadly.....by Lisa S. Garbaty

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Perhaps you’ve heard of the Choking “Game” before. Perhaps you know of it by other names: the Pass-out Game, the Fainting Game, and Suffocation Roulette are just a few of its names, but there are many more<sup>1</sup>. Maybe you’ve never heard of it at all. I hadn’t: until a young girl with a promising future at my daughter’s school died while playing.

### **What is the Choking Game?**

It’s a way to achieve a brief high by cutting off the supply of oxygen to the brain, either by choking one another or through self-strangulation with a noose or other ligature. Alternatively, the activity may involve one person taking a deep breath and holding it, while a second person hugs that person from behind until the first person feels dizzy and passes out.<sup>2</sup>

### **What are the potential risks?**

There have been reports of deaths, as well as serious injuries that include seizures, fractures, and brain injury ranging from subtle cognitive impairment to persistent vegetative state as a result of this activity.<sup>3</sup>

### **How prevalent is it?**

Actually, we don’t know. Currently, there is no universal diagnosis code for deaths and injuries caused by the Choking Game, so we do not have a means of accurately tracking these incidents. Further, it is believed that the extent of injuries and deaths from the choking game are underrepresented as many cases are never reported, or may be mischaracterized as suicide.<sup>4</sup> The estimates of youths participating in this activity range from 5% to 11%.<sup>5</sup> Per one organization’s website<sup>6</sup>, as of this writing there were 622 deaths and injuries of youths aged 6 to 21 in the USA from the Choking Game; their figures are based on self-reporting and media reports. Unfortunately, if the death was not given media attention, or was mischaracterized as a suicide, they may go undetected by the private agencies attempting to track this information. According to another non-profit organization’s website, Illinois has ranked as high as third (tying with nearby Ohio) in the nation in known incidents of the Choking Game.<sup>7</sup>

### **Should you rely on your child’s doctor to recognize the signs and provide counseling?**

Probably not. According to one study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>8</sup>, almost one-third of the physicians participating in their survey were unaware of the Choking Game. For those physicians who reported that they knew about the choking game, 61.3% reported that they heard about it through popular media, either alone or in combination with another source. Of those physicians who were aware of the Choking Game, approximately three-fourths identified  $\geq 1$  warning sign, and approximately one-half identified  $\geq 3$  of the known warning signs. (How many signs *are* there? Read on.) Of even greater concern is that *only 1.9%* of pediatricians reported that they included the Choking Game in anticipatory guidance for adolescents even though 64.9% of the respondents agreed that it should be included!

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<sup>1</sup> Research Update The Choking Game: CDC’s Findings on a Risky Youth Behavior. (2009) n.p. Retrieved 01/10/2013 from [http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/Choking/choking\\_game.html](http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/Choking/choking_game.html)

<sup>2</sup> McClave, Julie, L., Russell, Patricia, J., Lyren, Ann., O’Riordan, Mary Ann., & Bass, Nancy, E. (2009). *The Choking Game: Physician Perspectives*. American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved 01/10/2013 from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/125/1/82.full.pdf+html>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Ramowski, Sarah, K., Nystrom, Robert, J., Rosenberg, Kenneth, D., Gilchrist, Julie, & Chaumeton, Nigel, R. (2012). *Health Risks of Oregon Eighth-Grade Participants in the “Choking Game”: Results From a Population-Based Survey*. . Presented American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved 01/10/2013 from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2012/04/11/peds.2011-2482.full.pdf+html>

<sup>6</sup> GASP Choking Game, Community Support, Statistics: By Country, Age. (2012). [www.gaspinf.com](http://www.gaspinf.com). Retrieved 01/10/2013 from <http://www.gaspinf.com/en/stats-statistics.asp>

<sup>7</sup> Choking Game Statistics. (2006). *The DB Foundation, Inc.* Retrieved 01/10/2013 from <http://chokinggame.net/chokinggamestat.htm>

<sup>8</sup> McClave, *et al.*, *op. cit.*

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### **Will my child’s school provide preventative education?**

There is currently no requirement that preventative action for asphyxiation activities be taught in Illinois schools as, e.g. part of their DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs. Some schools have, upon discovering the activity, sent notices to parents as warnings,<sup>9 10</sup> or held workshops (usually after there has been an incident) to provide additional information. This is even though one study<sup>11</sup> found that 90 percent of the parents surveyed believe that information about this activity should be included in school health curricula. Absent a state mandate, it is up to the independent schools and school districts as to whether this information will be provided in your school’s setting.

### **What can we do to prevent more incidents?**

One medical association has issued a resolution which supports: increasing awareness among parents, educators, counselors and physicians of the risks associated with the choking game; education of teens about the dangers of the choking game; and the inclusion of information about the “choking game’s” dangers in classroom education and other school-sponsored discussions about drugs and risky behaviors.<sup>12</sup> The authors of the study, *The Choking Game: Physician Perspectives*, indicate in their conclusion that they believe that the choking game should be included in anticipatory guidance discussions with children and adolescents, and that pediatricians and family practitioners should be provided with reliable and accurate information about the dangers of the choking game, so that they in turn could pass it on to their adolescent patients and their parents.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the researchers in the study “Prevention of the Choking Game: parent perspectives” found that, while three-quarters of parents who responded were familiar with the choking game, considerably fewer (20%) indicated that they had talked to their children about this activity.

Please remember that you can influence what your children do, and consider talking to them about this in the same way you would about drug or alcohol abuse.

Also consider speaking to your principal or school council about incorporating this subject as part of the school health curriculum at your school.

Do you think this issue, or another issue is a good topic for a Resolution? Please contact me at [lgarbaty@illinoispta.org](mailto:lgarbaty@illinoispta.org).

### **What are the signs that your child is playing this dangerous “game?”**

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the signs include:

- Bloodshot eyes
- Marks on the neck
- Wearing high-necked shirts – even in warm weather
- Frequent, severe headaches
- Disorientation after spending time alone
- Increased and uncharacteristic irritability or hostility
- Ropes, scarves, and belts tied to bedroom furniture or doorknobs, or found knotted on the floor
- The unexplained presence of dog leashes, choke collars, bungee cords, etc.
- Petechiae (pinpoint bleeding spots) under the skin of the face, especially the eyelids, or the conjunctiva (the lining of the eyelids and eyes)

<sup>9</sup> Manchir, Michelle. Wheaton school warns parents about kids trying risky ‘pass-out game. *TribLocal Wheaton*. [News>Schools]. Retrieved 01/13/2013 from <http://triblocal.com/wheaton/2012/05/24/wheaton-school-warns-parents-about-kids-trying-risky-pass-out-game/>

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln Primary and (Irving) Middle School, Choking Game. (2012), <http://www.psd150.org/Page/5291>. Retrieved 01/10/2013 from <http://www.psd150.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&ModuleInstanceID=2944&ViewID=047E6BE3-6D87-4130-8424-D8E4E9ED6C2A&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=10917&PageID=5291>

<sup>11</sup> Bernacki, Jessica, M. & Davies, W. Hobart. (2012). Prevention of the Choking Game: parent perspectives. Presented University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Wisconsin, USA. Retrieved 1/10/2013 from <http://jivresearch.org/jivr/index.php/jivr/article/viewFile/119/158>

<sup>12</sup> American Osteopathic Association, July 2011; see <http://www.osteopathic.org/inside-aoa/events/annual-business-meeting/house-resolutions/Documents/H-416-Dangers-of-the-choking-game-BSAPH.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> McClave, *et al.*, *Op. cit.*