

Family Fusion ▶ All about kin and kith

Child suicide, a society's concern

While taking own life is complex, involving layers of risk factors, the question many are asking is this: why would little ones want to die by suicide?

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Picture this: You bid your three children aged six, four and two goodbye in the morning to go look for menial work such as washing people's clothes at a fee. As a single mother, you have nobody to care for the children while you are away. It would be better if the children were in school, but due to Covid-19 pandemic, they have to stay home. You ask your neighbour to check on them. The six-year-old would be in charge while you are away. But then, the worst happens ... he commits suicide.

This is not a script from a movie. It happened at Fundi Hamisi Village in Ganda Ward in Kilifi county in June last year as Covid-19 ravaged the country. The boy was found dangling from the roof, minutes after he and his siblings entered the mud-walled ramshackle house to continue playing after a heavy downpour disrupted their outdoor play.

There is perhaps nothing more shocking than hearing about young children taking their own life. It is difficult for people to comprehend that children as young as this could even conceive of killing themselves.

While raising alarm on rising cases of suicide in the country, Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) boss George Kinoti recently said at least 483 Kenyans committed suicide between March and June this year. What is even more worrying was that the youngest was a nine-year-old. There has been a widely held belief among adults that children do not have the planning ability or understanding of death's finality to consciously make such a decision.

This is what Simon Maina, a resident of Kirinyaga thought when he first received the news that his eight-year-old son had died by suicide in August 2019.

"Initially I could not be convinced that such a young boy could kill himself," said Maina.

His son hanged himself after his elder sister refused to allow him to

use marking pencils. Jerusha Wanjiku, the boy's mother had bought the marking pencils for the boy to use while on holiday, but his sister took and locked them in the cupboard without her knowledge. When the boy asked her sister to handover the pencils, she declined. This seems to have angered the boy who took the rope and killed himself.

Pain and distress

While suicidal thoughts and self-harm have been well documented in teenagers, mental health experts say too little attention has been paid to young children, despite growing evidence that they are also in crisis.

"Just like in most African countries, it is hard to establish the actual prevalence of suicidal deaths or attempts, since national records depend on the few cases reported in health centres and police stations," says James Kabiru Karuru, a counselling psychologist.

Karuru says among younger children, suicide attempts are often impulsive. They may be related to feelings of sadness, confusion, anger, or problems with attention and hyperactivity. For starters, we can recognise that if a child is thinking about suicide, it is an indication that they are experiencing a great deal of pain and distress.

Certain problems, Karuru explains, increase the chances of suicidal thoughts in children and pre-teens. They include depression or another mental health problem, such as bipolar disorder (manic-depressive illness) or schizophrenia.

"A disruptive or abusive family life,

exposure to violence, feelings of hopelessness or helplessness, a history of sexual abuse, a history of being bullied are other reasons a child may have suicidal thoughts. A parent with depression or substance use disorder may also push the child to commit suicide and so does a friend, peer, family member, or hero (such as a sports figure or musician) who recently attempted or died by suicide," Karuru explains.

Joseph Ngaara, a children's champion, social mobiliser and inspirational writer, with a blog, *Stories of Triumph and Tragedy*, concurs.

"Previously, suicides were associated with adults and older adolescents aged 17 years and above, but in the new normal era we are living in, we are hearing a lot more of children taking their lives," he says.

The argument, he says, has been that adolescents tend to be more developed cognitively and socially, leading to increased self-awareness, evaluation of events, overwhelming thoughts and a need for independence, which may challenge their coping ability. He says studies on suicide primarily focused on adults and older adolescents to associate it with substance and alcohol abuse, which may lead to mental illness or disorder. In high-income countries substances abused include tobacco, cannabis, illicit drugs and non-medical use of prescription drugs. But in

low-income countries causes are extreme poverty, lack of access to empowerment opportunities and discrimination.

Red flags

Experts say depression and self-harm do not necessarily look the same in young children as they do in teens and adults. The so-called "red flags" people

are cautioned to look for can be subtle in young children. While a young adult might say something like, "You'll be better off when I'm gone," for example, a child might say something like, "No one cares if I'm here." A child might suddenly show less interest in playing outside or struggle with schoolwork or display new behavioural problems.

"From suicide cases we hear about, victims (and children by extension) are becoming vulnerable to suicidal thoughts and behaviour by impulse, in moments of disappointment crisis with a breakdown in the ability to deal with life stresses," he shares.

Even in children, Ngaara says it is undeniable that there is a clear link between suicide and mental disorders, particularly depression.

Now, mental health experts fear that pandemic — which has increased anxiety and depression among adults and teenagers, could compound the issues young



NGAARA

"From the family level, I believe we can prevent mental health problems"



KARURU

Asking specific questions shows you care

AT A GLANCE

● Kenya's suicidal deaths have been on the rise from about 265 to 421 between 2008 and 2017 (World Health Organisation, 2018). In 2019, the average was 320 cases, but in the last three months (June - August 2021), the number peaked at 483.

● Amid the upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic, the home environment has become unstable for many children, especially those from families hit hardest by the pandemic.

● Trust your gut. If you notice behavioural changes in your child that aren't a one-time issue, take note.

children face. "It's probably going to be worse for those already struggling or disadvantaged by society," says Ngaara.

Ngaara says suicide topic is close to his heart. "Firstly, because my late mum was suicidal and had a mental disorder, and her mother (my grandmother) committed suicide in 1974, after three attempts. Secondly, as a children's champion with over 20 years experience in teaching Sunday school in various churches, it shatters my heart to hear or imagine that a child has taken his/her life," he reveals.

Studies show the risk of suicide is higher if someone else in the family has committed suicide. Younger children seem to be more impacted by family conflict—while for teens, it is their peer relationships that have the biggest effect.

Way forward

"From the family level, I believe we can prevent and mitigate mental health problems, which can quickly turn into suicide. One way is by increasing awareness of this 'silent epidemic' through sensitisation, proper diagnosis and effective management of mental illness. People (and children) with mental and substance use disorders need early identification, treatment and care," he adds.

Currently, there is not enough research on treatment-based outcomes with young children to say that there is a "proven" therapeutic approach for working with them. On his part, Karuru notes that people often feel uncomfortable talking about suicide. However, asking your child or adolescent whether he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide can be helpful. Specific examples of such questions include: Are you feeling sad or depressed? Are you thinking about hurting or killing yourself? Have you ever thought about hurting or killing yourself?

"Rather than putting thoughts in your child's head, these questions can provide assurance that somebody cares and will give your child the chance to talk about their problems," Karuru advises.

Essentially, Karuru and Ngaara agree that anyone working with young children should be alert to the fact that children of any age can be vulnerable to suicidal thoughts and feelings. But with proper support in place, children can work through the feelings and triggers that result in suicidal thinking and learn effective coping skills to deal with difficult life situations.