



Partnership for Children
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MISSION

To help children and young people, throughout the world, develop skills which will enhance their present and future emotional wellbeing.

World Suicide Prevention Day and Zippy's Friends

Zippy's Friends was first conceived as a response to the global tragedy of suicide. The first pilot of the programme was run by Befrienders International (now Befrienders Worldwide), an organisation that co-ordinates the work of telephone helpline services in almost 40 countries. To mark World Suicide Prevention Day 2008, Prof Brian Mishara, President of the International Association for Suicide Prevention, explains how Zippy's Friends is helping people to find other ways of coping with difficulties.

Each year, the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) sponsor World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10. The WHO estimates that one million people die in the world each year by suicide. Suicides occur in all countries, and in developed countries suicide is usually the second or third leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults. It is the 13th leading cause of death worldwide for people of all ages. More people die by suicide each year than die in all wars, terrorist activities and homicides.



Prof Brian Mishara

In addition, many millions make non-fatal suicide attempts in the context of emotional distress and suffering.

What makes the situation even more tragic is the fact that suicides are preventable. The vast majority of seriously suicidal people find other solutions for their problems, and only a small proportion do not get help and attempt suicide; an even smaller number die from their attempts.



The theme for the 2008 World Suicide Prevention Day is 'Think Globally, Plan Nationally, Act Locally.' The emphasis is on the need to work simultaneously at different levels, to promote understanding about suicide and highlight effective prevention activities. There are many things one can do to prevent suicide when a person is already in a situation of distress and considering ending his or her life. Most people who complete suicides have mental health problems, and the treatment of those

problems constitutes one prevention strategy. Other means of providing help, ranging from psychotherapy to telephone emotional support and support from family and friends, all play an important role.

However, researchers often lament that prevention activities focus mostly on crisis situations, when the risk of suicide has developed to such a degree that action must be taken. In the ideal situation, one would want to prevent people from becoming so desperate by developing their abilities to cope with problems before they become overwhelming. This is where *Zippy's Friends* fits into the picture.

Zippy's Friends can be considered a mental health promotion programme, since it fosters the development of children's abilities to cope with everyday problems. Although young children learn about suicide (by age 5 or 6 most children know that people can commit suicide and are aware of how to do this), suicide risk does not increase significantly until adolescence. Nevertheless, the skills that we learn to deal with everyday adversities are acquired early in life. The premise behind



waiting until problems are so severe that one needs to consult a mental health professional or crisis center, *Zippy's Friends* focuses on building essential skills that may help children avoid having crisis situations deteriorate to such an extent. If children are able to effectively learn good coping skills, they can avoid letting problems become so overwhelming that they would be at risk of suicide. At the very least, the skills taught in *Zippy's Friends* should help children identify when they are in a difficult situation and ask for help. It is my dream that some day programmes like *Zippy's Friends* will reduce the need to have suicide prevention programmes around the world.

Brian L. Mishara, Ph.D. President, International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), a non-governmental association in official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO) Professor, Psychology Department Director, Centre for Research and Intervention on Suicide and Euthanasia (CRISE) University of Quebec at Montreal



Zippy's Friends is that if children learn a wide range of effective coping strategies, including how to ask for and give help, when they grow older they will use these strategies to resolve problems early on, before they become crises.

Although *Zippy's Friends* does not directly focus on suicidal behaviours (indeed, suicide is not mentioned anywhere in this educational programme), *Zippy's Friends* and similar programmes may provide long term solutions to reducing suicides around the world. Rather than

To find out more about IASP go to <http://www.iasp.info/>

To find out more about Befrienders Worldwide go to <http://www.befrienders.org/>

To find out more about *Zippy's Friends* go to <http://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/zippy-s-friends.html>

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