

Original article

## Family Factors Associated With Suicide Attempts Among Chinese Adolescent Students: A National Cross-Sectional Survey

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** To determine the prevalence and associated family factors of suicide attempts among junior and/or senior high school students, so as to provide bases for preventive measures of suicide in China.

**Methods:** A total of 13,512 students from 32 junior and/or senior high schools in grades 7 to 11 in eight cities of China participated in a self-administered anonymous survey to report their frequency of suicide attempts during the past year. Sociodemographic characteristics, tobacco, and alcohol use in the past 30 days were asked. Stressful family life events were used to evaluate the subjects' family characteristics.

**Results:** Overall, 2.7% (338/12,470) in-school adolescents reported a suicide attempt during the past year, girls significantly more often than boys. Considered independently, all stressful family life events were strongly associated with increased risk for self-reported suicide attempts. When taking sociodemographic characteristics, life style, and all the five family factors selected from factor analysis into consideration, there was a significant independent impact of three family factors on increasing suicide attempts risk among adolescents. The most notable risks were derived from improper parental rearing behavior, separation from parents, and social problems of the family members. However, neither poor material conditions of family life nor family member's adversity contribute significantly to the risk.

**Conclusions:** This study not only indicates that suicide attempt is a significant public health issue among in-school adolescents in China, but also confirms that adolescents with family problems commonly manifest suicide attempts, which highlights the importance of considering family environmental factors when assessing suicide risk. © 2010 Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine. All rights reserved.

### Keywords:

Suicide attempts; Stressful life events; Family factors; Parent-child relations; Adolescent; China

Suicide in adolescents has been identified as a serious public health problem worldwide. Although the rates vary among different countries, suicide is currently one of the top three causes of death for adolescents 15–19 years old [1].

Suicide attempts are relatively common among adolescents, with a recent international systematic review of popu-

lation-based studies estimating a mean proportion of 9.7% of adolescents reporting having attempted suicide at some point in their lives [2]. Although few young people who report having tried to kill themselves may in fact have wished to die, and very few will go on to complete suicide, there is an agreement that a prior suicide attempt is one of the best predictors of both a repeat attempt and an eventual completed suicide [2, 3]. In addition, the ratio of suicide attempts to completed suicides among adolescents is estimated to be 50:1 to 100:1 [1]. Therefore, early identification and intervention of suicide attempts is of great importance to prevent youth suicide.

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Despite much concern about the high completed suicide rate in young women in China [4], there is increasing public and policy concern about the issue of adolescent suicide attempts. Recently, we investigated the suicidal behavior and risk factors in a sample of 10,894 adolescents in four rural counties of China, and found that 5.8% of the sample reported having made suicide attempts during the past 12 months [5].

For adolescents, family life is the most important specific domain of their lives, and it is evident in Pfeffer et al.'s argument that suicidal behavior often represented a final effort to escape from a miserable and unbearable family situation [6]. In Asian societies like China, the family characteristics are very unique. For instance, Chinese parents are less likely to communicate with their children but more likely to use physical discipline if their children break the rules made by parents [7]. Liu et al. reported that 14% of Chinese rural adolescents had been beaten by parents during the past year, and adolescents who reported physical punishment by parents during the past year were at two- to threefold greater risk for suicide attempts than those who did not report physical punishment by parents [8]. However, there is neglect of family factors. To date, relatively little is known about epidemiological characteristics of suicide attempts and its family-related risk factors for a representative national sample in Chinese school-going adolescents. Hence, using data collected through a self-reported anonymous survey administered to students of eight cities in China ( $N = 12,470$ ), the current study investigated the following: (1) the prevalence of 1-year suicide attempts among Chinese in-school adolescents in total and by gender, and (2) the family factors associated with adolescent 1-year suicide attempts.

## Methods

### *Participants*

This was a cluster sampling. Because China has a vast territory with diversities in geographic and economic development, we divided the eight sampled cities into three areas: east (including Beijing, Shaoxing in Zhejiang province, and Guangzhou in Guangdong province), middle (including Ezhou in Hubei province, Harbin in Heilongjiang province, and Taiyuan in Shanxi province), and west (including Guiyang in Guizhou province and Chongqing) areas. Four schools (including two rural and two urban schools) in each city were selected, and all the schools included were general junior and/or senior high schools (excluding experimental, professional, or key schools). A total of 13,512 students from 32 schools in eight cities of China were recruited in the present study, and participants were from grades 7 through 11 (excluding Grade 9 and Grade 12 because of entrance examination), indicating that students with different socioeconomic background were included. In the participating schools, 559 of the 13,512 sampled students were excluded from the study

because of absence from school on the day of the survey or because they did not want to respond to the questionnaire. Thus 12,953 of the 13,512 sampled students submitted questionnaires (95.9%), of which 483 questionnaires were discarded because of high levels of missing data or their answers were clearly fictitious or inconsistent. Finally 12,470 usable questionnaires remained. The overall response rate was 92.3%.

### *Procedure*

We administered a pilot study of the survey questionnaires in September 2007, and carried out the data collection in March 2008. Because of the nature of this project, ethical approval was granted from the Ethics Commission of Anhui Medical University. Written parental consent was not a requirement for survey research in Chinese. However, students were asked for verbal consent to take part in the study and were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any point in time, without penalty, as well as assured that their responses would be kept either anonymous or confidential. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to the students and consent to participate in the study was obtained from all students involved. Students completed the questionnaire during a regular class period, spending about 20 minutes to record their responses to the survey questions.

### *Measures*

The variables were selected from a battery of survey instruments, many of which had been used in the previous local studies. The questionnaires were designed to comprise the following items:

*Demographic characteristics.* Demographic variables include gender, age, grade, city, ethnicity (Han nationality, other ethnic minority), household registration (rural areas, urban areas), and whether only one child.

*Tobacco and alcohol use.* Current smoking referred to any cigarette smoking during the past month. Current alcohol use was defined as at least one drink of alcohol during the past month.

*Stressful family life events.* Seventeen family events (e.g., experiencing physical punishment from parents) were assessed in response to the following question: "Whether the following family-related life event happened to you? And if so, whether it remained having an impact on you during the past 6 months?" The answers were assigned the following scores: "the event has never happened to you, or happened but without significant impact on you" was coded as "no" (score 1), and "the event happened with impact" was coded as "yes" (score 2).

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