

The "choking game": self-strangulation with a belt and clothes rack

Manouri P Senanayake¹, KAS Chandraratne², TUN de Silva³ and DC Weerasuriya⁴

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Introduction

Unsafe games are a disturbing trend among older children and adolescents in western countries [1]. A bizarre play activity they engage in, known as the "choking game", "airplaning", "space monkey", "suffocation game" or "blackout", involves self-strangulation. Restricting the oxygen supply to the brain to induce unconsciousness or near unconsciousness may cause permanent neurological damage or death [2]. Television viewing and internet surfing may propagate this practice [3]. We report a case of near-strangulation in a 10-year old schoolboy.

Case report

A previously healthy 10-year old boy with no apparent medical or psychological problems suffered near strangulation by a belt harnessed to a clothes rack in his bedroom. He had been found smoking a 'beedi' on a single occasion, but there was no other history of drug or alcohol abuse. He was unresponsive and frothing at the mouth when found by his mother. Estimated time of strangulation was 5 min. He was brought to our hospital, within 10 min. On arrival he developed seizures. Initial Glasgow Coma Score was 5. His face was swollen and cyanosed. A linear imprint abrasion was clearly visible on the neck (Figure 1). He received assisted ventilation for one day. He remained disoriented for 3 days but his mental state improved. On discharge he had no neurological deficits apart from apparent amnesia for the event.

He was described by his parents as a mischievous and adventurous child who spends long hours unsupervised,



Figure 1. Linear imprint abrasion on neck (arrow).

watching cartoons and violent films on television. He was known to act and copy what he saw in films. We found a clothes rack placed adjacent to his bed with the ligature (a belt) he had used for self-strangulation.

Discussion

Partial asphyxiation by self-strangulation is a recognised thrill-seeking and risk-taking behaviour that young men and boys engage in as a prank, a dare, and to create a sense of euphoria or erotic feelings. It is usually practiced by males. The rise in blood carbon dioxide tension and reduction of cerebral blood flow is thought to provide the desired feeling.

Fatalities in under 15-year olds have been by hanging with drawstrings of clothing, window cords, cloth towel dispensers, and a necklace [4]. Unawareness of the "choking game" can result in such cases being reported as homicide or suicide. Suicide in the under 15-year age group, though rare, has doubled among 10 to 14 year olds in the U.S.A. 1981 to 1992 [5].

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¹Professor in Paediatrics, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo. ²Senior Registrar, Intensive Care Unit, ³Senior Registrar, Professorial Unit, ⁴Registrar, Professorial Unit, Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children, Colombo. Correspondence: MPS, e-mail: <manouri.senanayake@gmail.com> (Competing interest: none declared). Received 8 July 2006 and revised version accepted 24 September 2006.