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Mother warns 'game' is deadly

Lansing woman on mission to educate others after son, 14, dies

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Cody Willard-Joblonski seemingly never had a mean thing to say about anyone.

At age 14, the varsity wrestler still gave his mother a hug and a kiss before bed. And when his parents weren't looking, he let his 4-year-old sister watch the cartoon "SpongeBob SquarePants" because he knew it made her laugh.

That's the Cody his mother, Dawn Kuhn of Lansing, remembers. Those are the memories that give her strength, even as she struggles to understand the one that haunts her - returning to their Sunnyside Avenue home May 11 to find her son dead at the top of the stairs.

Cody's death originally looked like a suicide but was later ruled an accident. According to the Ingham County Medical Examiner's office, Cody died after playing the "choking game," an activity in which people - mainly children ages 9 to 16, according to a national anti-choking group - strangle themselves or each other with their hands or ligatures.

The goal is to pass out and then feel a sort of "high" when they wake up.

Cody didn't wake up. Now, nearly a month later, his family is on a crusade to alert other parents and youth about the dangers of a sometimes deadly game that has local and federal health officials concerned.

"If someone would have talked about this before, maybe it would have saved Cody," Dawn Kuhn said. "Parents are aware of drugs and alcohol, but they have no idea about this."

They've already had student assemblies at Eastern High School, where Cody was a freshman, and at Gardner Middle School.

They'll also host a forum with the Church of the Resurrection in Lansing, where Cody was a member of the youth group, at 7 p.m. Tuesday to raise awareness about the choking game and the warning signs that a child might be playing it.

"There was such a purpose to his life," said Shirley Cain, the youth group director. "There has to be a purpose to his death. This is Cody's cause."

A growing problem?

At least 82 youths have died in the United States since 1995 because of the choking game, according to a February report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to the CDC's report, 87 percent of the deaths tracked were boys.

The number of deaths could be higher, however, because CDC researchers said they were forced to base their count on what they could find in media coverage and on Web sites devoted to the issue.

That's because the game is rarely recorded as an official cause of death - perhaps because the deaths are assumed to be suicides - which makes Cody's an unusual example here and nationwide.

Ingham County Health Director Dean Sienko hopes the teen's death also is the last example.

Behavior widespread

"This behavior is perhaps more widespread than we would otherwise believe," Sienko said. "This is an extremely dangerous practice, and we have to convince our young people to avoid it."

Sienko said the more they investigated Cody's death, the more it became clear he was not a suicide victim.

The way Cody was found suggested an accidental death, Sienko said. Cody also had been talking about the game - a common sign a child is thinking about participating.

In addition, Cody displayed none of the typical characteristics of a teen at risk of suicide. He was a self-starter who signed up for honors courses. He was considered popular, was active with his church and happy at home.

Ironically, that's the profile of the kind of kid who is likely to try the game, according to Games Adolescents Shouldn't Play (GASP), a national anti-choking game organization.

According to the group's Web site, high-achieving children are tempted to experiment with the game because they think it will give them a way to get high without becoming involved with illegal drug or alcohol use they know is dangerous.

Many kids simply don't realize the choking game is just as deadly, said Scott Metheny, a Pennsylvania police officer and a top-level volunteer for GASP.

He tells kids that even if they don't die from the game, they suffer brain damage every time they pass out. The high they feel when they wake up is caused by a chemical release that occurs whenever brain cells die from lack of oxygen.

"What they're feeling is their brain dying," Metheny said.

A mom's mission

Cody's iPod sits on the kitchen counter in the Kuhn home. His summer wrestling camp schedule still is posted on the bulletin board.

On a dry-erase board next to the phone, Cody's cell phone number still is listed.

In so many ways, Dawn said, they feel like Cody is still with them, urging them to reach out to other teens and parents.

"Our mission now for Cody is to make it stop," she said. "That's what we have to do."

But no matter how many people they warn, Dawn wonders if she'll ever be able to answer the one question that she asks herself over and over: Why?

"I sit in his bedroom and look around and say, 'Cody, what were you thinking?' " Dawn said. "I wait and I wait and I wait, but he hasn't answered me yet."
