

# CAUSE OF DEATH: **Suicide**

## AGE: **8**

Angelica Gutierrez's self-inflicted death in the third grade raises a disturbing question: Why are more preteens taking their own lives?

The facts of Angelica Gutierrez's death are brutally clear: On the evening of Oct. 5 of last year, the 8-year-old from suburban Syracuse walked into her bedroom, ignored her grandmother's orders to change into pajamas and put on her favorite jeans and a T-shirt. Then she climbed the shelves of her closet, looped a thin plastic belt over a bar and, after placing her head through the loop, stepped off the shelf to her death.

But if the manner in which Angie killed herself is clear, the reasons behind her act are not. A child of divorce, she'd talked about missing her dad, who lived in another state, and was disturbed when her mom and stepdad left for a vacation without her two days before she died. But she was also, according to her mother, an effervescent child who had never before mentioned suicide. "I know my daughter," says Jessica Misa, 31. "She was a happy child. There was no reason why she would do this."

As perplexing as it is on its own, Angie's death is also part of a trend that has experts in mental health increasingly worried. While suicide among children this young remains a rare occurrence—fewer than a dozen kids aged 5 to 9 will take their



"I don't want to face the reality that she's not here," says Jessica Misa of daughter Angie (from top to bottom, in 2002, with brother Eddie in 1999 and at her 2001 First Communion).



**"For some children," says psychiatrist and author Cynthia Pfeffer, "attempting suicide may be a way to get back at their parents"**



"Sometimes I'm angry," says Jessica (with Voltaire and sons, from left, Jean, Eddie and Sam). "I want to blame someone."

own lives this year—the number of youths aged 10 to 14 who commit suicide has doubled over the past two decades, now accounting for about 300 deaths a year. At the same time, doctors and social workers who treat children have started to diagnose the conditions that most often cause suicide, such as depression and anxiety disorders, in younger and younger patients. "The age of suicidal thought is creeping down," says Laurie Flynn, director of TeenScreen, an antisuicide program used by high schools in 26 states.

Mary Jumbelic, chief medical examiner in the upstate New York county where Angie Gutierrez lived, began looking at the problem after a string of child attempts in 1997. The findings were startling: Data collected from hospitals in Onondaga County told of 266 youth suicide attempts in a 12-month period—of which 85 cases, or nearly a third, were carried out by kids younger than 14. "I really think there's cause for concern in

this age group," says Jumbelic. "Our children are under tremendous stress, and it's coming out in violence against each other and themselves."

As with all suicides, mental illnesses like depression and anxiety disorders are usually the cause. But researchers from the Centers for Disease Control who recently interviewed suicide survivors have identified other risk factors. Family life is more chaotic than ever, they say, and frequent moves,

#### POINTERS FOR PARENTS

- Take suicide threats seriously.
- As kids deal with puberty, bouts of depression are typical, but if they last two weeks or more, the child may need treatment.
- New schools or neighborhoods are stressful for children and may aggravate an existing vulnerability.
- "Help kids learn to put things in perspective," advises Madelyn Gould, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University. "If not, one anxiety can trigger another—and they can only handle so many crises before they crack."

whether between homes or cities, increase the likelihood of attempts. Children are also more impulsive than adults and thus less likely to go through a cool-down period before taking drastic action; one out of four of the survivors told the CDC team that less than five minutes passed between their decision to commit suicide and the actual attempt.

Other experts point out that kids use suicide to call attention to their problems—sometimes without realizing the irreversible consequences. "Whether the children fully understand the ramifications of their actions," says Cynthia Pfeffer, a Cornell University professor of psychiatry and author of *The Suicidal Child*, "is often hard to determine."

Certainly, Jessica Misa insists her daughter Angie could not have fully understood what she was doing the night she took her life. Born on Jan. 8, 1994, in North Bergen, N.J., she was the oldest of Misa's two kids with computer administrator Eduar-

do Gutierrez. Pictures on every wall of her mother's two-bedroom apartment show a confident, curly-haired girl who loved to reenact scenes from the *Austin Powers* movies and dance to J.Lo in the living room. "She had charisma," says her third-grade teacher, Patti Bonesteel. "The other kids wanted to get to know her."

Yet Angie wasn't always so upbeat. After her parents' 1996 divorce, her dad moved to Florida and, according to Misa, repeatedly reneged on promises to call or visit his children. "He was unreliable, and it hurt her," says Angie's uncle Frank Forgett, 34, an academic adviser at New Jersey City University. (Gutierrez says his attempts to keep in touch were blocked by Misa.) In 1999 Jessica wed anesthesiologist Voltaire Misa and Angie found a loving substitute

dad, although she constantly longed to hear from her first father. "She seemed needy of adults to care for her," says Laura Lingwood, a counselor who worked with a support group for children with divorced parents that Angie joined in second grade.

For her part, Misa says she and her daughter always had an open relationship. "If something was bothering her, like someone didn't like her, she'd talk to me," says Jessica. Indeed, the day she died, Angie called her mother's cell phone 15 times, although Misa, away from her kids for only the second time since she married Voltaire, was on a boat cruise and had switched off the phone. Used to her daughter's multiple messages, Jessica deleted most of them without listening.

That Angie's problems ran deeper

than her mother ever knew became clear after her death. Police at the scene found a drawing of a stick figure with a line through the neck and the word "closet," as well as a note that read, "Why am I the meanest in the family?" Suicidal herself after Angie's death, Jessica is convinced the attempt was a plea for attention gone wrong. As the anniversary of her daughter's death nears, she still hasn't taken down Angie's purple lunchbox from a hook on the front door. The girl's last box of Rice Krispies is in the kitchen, right where she left it. "I can't believe how much I miss her," says Jessica. "I can accept that she did all these things, but I don't think she knew she would die. At that age, what do you know?"

- Susan Horsburgh
- Joanne Fowler in Syracuse

## A Survivor's Tale: Bouncing Back from Despair

**M**iddle school threw everything out of kilter for Lauren Kryder. Once a straight-A student with a tight bunch of pals, she soon found herself struggling with homework at Grey Culbreth Middle School in Chapel Hill, N.C. Socially she bounced from the jocks to the punks, unable to find a good fit. "I could be surrounded by 20 people and still feel lonely," says Kryder, now 17. As her grades slipped, she withdrew from family and friends. Angry and profoundly frustrated, the 12-year-old bought a 10-pack of razor blades. Over the course of the next year, she slashed her wrists without causing serious injury at least 15 times—whenever she scored badly in a test or had a fight with friends. "It almost became a stress relief for me," says Kryder, who had witnessed a classmate's handgun suicide in the school bathroom barely a year before, "an emotional letting-go."

Now Kryder—who crawled out of her depression with therapy and antidepressants by the end of seventh grade—is throwing other kids a lifeline. After learning more about depression through a youth initiative called Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program, she persuaded the vice-principal at her old middle school to introduce the program there in 1999. East Chapel Hill High School—where Kryder is currently a senior—came next. She has distributed 50,000 cards printed with the Yellow Ribbon hotline number to hospitals and schools, and her goal now is to get the program into all of the state's middle schools and high schools. Depressed kids often attempt suicide without actually succeeding—sometimes as a desperate way of seeking help. "They want to show people how much they are hurting," says Kryder. Thanks to her help, more people are listening.



"Kids want to fit in," says Kryder (with dog Bradley). "When they don't, that's when the problems start."