Case report / *Olgu sunumu*

Online challenge related self-harm in children and adolescents: two case reports

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ABSTRACT

The contagious nature of suicides which is called as Werther's effect characterized by increase of suicidal behaviors after suicide reports on media and fictional portrayal of it on television is a well-known phenomenon. A new fashion of viral games which were claimed to have encouraged self-harm among children and adolescents are frightening families. We will discuss two adolescent cases who evaluated in outpatient service for online challenge related self-harm behavior. Psychiatric evaluation revealed that both children were suffering from psychiatric disorders, had peer problems and were socially isolated. This is the first paper from Turkey which reported that viral games might prod children and adolescents for self-harm. ***(Anatolian Journal of Psychiatry 2019; 20(5):556-558)***

Keywords: *self-harm, children, online challenge, Blue Whale, Momo, suicide*

Çocuk ve ergenlerde çevirim içi meydan okuma oyunları ile ilişkili kendine zarar verme davranışı: İki olgu sunumu

ÖZ

Werther etkisi olarak adlandırılan ve basında yer alan intihar haberleri ile televizyonda yayınlanan kurgusal intihar görüntüleri sonrasında intihar davranışının artması ile karakterize olan intiharın bulaşıcı doğası iyi bilinmektedir. Bununla beraber, günümüzde çocuklar ve ergenler arasında kendine zarar verme davranışını artırdığı iddia edilen yeni bir viral oyun tarzı aileleri korkutmaktadır. Bu olgu sunumunda, çevrim içi meydan okuma oyunlarıyla ilişkili olabileceği düşünülen kendine zarar verme davranışı ile polikliniğimize başvuran iki olgunun tartışılması amaçlanmıştır. Her ne kadar çocukların kendine zarar verici davranışları bu oyunlara katılmalarından sonra gelişmiş olsa da, psikiyatrik değerlendirmeleri, bu oyunla tanışmalarından çok öncesinde iki çocukta da psikiyatrik bir bozukluk olduğunu ve sosyal izolasyon ile akran sorunlarının olduğunu açığa çıkardı. Bu olgu sunumu Türkiye'de viral oyunların çocuk ve ergenlerde kendine zarar verme davranışı için tetikleyici olabileceğini gösteren ilk yayındır. ***(Anadolu Psikiyatri Derg 2019; 20(5):556-558)***

Anahtar sözcükler: *Kendine zarar verme, çocuk, çevrimiçi meydan okuma, Mavi Balina, Momo, intihar*

INTRODUCTION

Suicide, the second most common cause of death in adolescence, is one of the leading global public health concerns.[1] Many factors have been proposed to contribute to suicidal behaveors in childhood which are mostly preventable. However most of the adolescents at-tempted to suicide have been showed to suffer from a significant psychiatric disorder, notably depressive mood disorder.[2] A new fashion of viral games that has proposed to have encouraged adolescents attempt to violence, self-harm and even suicides through online challenges and

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tasks has been claimed for suicides in Russia, US and Europe.[3-5] Although this fashion is started with the Blue Whale Challenge (BWC), the Momo which induces fear elements and risk-taking behaviors by the way of challenges, and the Meriam which is known to be popular in the Middle East countries consist of similar tasks, which encourage the adolescents for risky behaviors, self-harm and even suicides.[6,7] Unlike other online games, these games are played through messaging applications such as Telegram, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp or Instagram messenger that make it hard to prevent the intervention by the parents and governments. Such challenges might be a serious threat because it could rapidly spread to large masses and the contagious nature of adolescent suicides.[8]

When the adverse effects of such challenges on the psychosocial wellbeing of children are taken into account, it will be understood that it is a public health priority to protect children and adolescents from facing such potentially hazardous games. Although research has turned onto internet use and suicide-related factors, medical information about online challenges has not progressed further from case reports.[9,10]

It is thought that defining of across cultural characteristics of the online suicide games that are spreading all over the world and the social, emotional and behavioral characteristics of the vulnerable individuals will shed light on the prevention of this kind of suicides. We believe that sharing information about 'online risk', which is new to health professionals and which is difficult to investigate with traditional research methods, provides a significant contribution.[8] We will present two cases who presented with an online challenge related to self-harm and suicidal behaviors. One of them was a refugee boy who exposed to a game called 'Mariam' and a Turkish boy exposed to a game called 'Momo'. To our knowledge, these are the first case reports of online challenge related suicidal behavior from Turkey

CASE 1

An eleven years old boy presented to our outpatient service with his mother through the agency of Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association (ASSSA). He was referred to our service by the psychologists of ASSSA because of lesions on his extremity which are thought to be generated by himself and his suicidal thoughts. He was refusing to state that the wounds were generated by himself and proposed that a fight causes these lesions caused by a fight. However, he told his schoolmates that he had done it himself and had suicidal thoughts. Although he reported having the depressive mood, lack of energy and interest, social isolation for almost two years, his behaveors were said to have changed dramatically in the last two weeks, and he was always chatting on the phone, was not communicating with anyone around and was nervous. During this time, the family noticed that the child was constantly interacting with someone on the mobile phone, and later found some conversations that were promoting him to harm himself. As soon as they noticed, they restricted access to the phone and deleted all the applications on the phone. When he was interviewed about his participation in the game called 'Mariam' in his psychiatric assessment, he denied constantly. In the inspection, there were multiple and in the form of immersion wounds on both forearms. In his history, he relocated from Syria three years ago, and he witnessed blasts, his father had a mental disorder and epilepsy, and had died one year ago. During the psychiatric assessment, it was revealed that the boy had an excessive fear of dark-ness, enuresis, sleeping problem, low self-esteem, and social isolation. The patient was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder, enuresis nocturne and depressive disorder, and his psychotherapeutic and psychopharmacological treatment was started.

CASE 2

The second patient was an eight years old boy. He was followed for one year with a diagnosis of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and expressive language disorder. There were problems in peer relationships, and he was the victim of peer bullying at school. It attracted the attention of his family that he was talking to his brother about the Momo and watching videos online a few times. When questioned, he believed that the Momo came to Turkey at that time. Also, a classmate got in touch Momo on his mobile phone and adhered to Momo's task. He said that his classmates made him encourage self-cutting and cut his arms once. The family was informed about the measures and a pervasive psychiatric, and psychosocial treatment process emerged.

There are a few noteworthy points which can be extracted from the case report. First of all, although such games might promote self-harm and suicidal behavior, it cannot be thought of as

a sole cause for suicide. However, these challenges might have a serious 'precipitant effect'. Additionally, having depression, emotional difficulties and social isolation or peer problems are known as substantial risk factors for problematic internet use.[11,12] Therefore, the risk factors for engaging in risky games stand out for prevention strategies. In this respect, it can be estimated that refugee children and adolescents who are exposed to adverse life events such as trauma exposure, relocation, loss of relatives, are one of the highest risk groups in terms of social Isolation, peer acceptance and emotional sensitivety.[13] As with all other psychiatric disorders and mental health threats, the risks on the internet are also valid for refugees and should be considered during mental health assessments.

An important caveat for preventive strategies is that social integration of risk groups in terms of social isolation is vital during childhood and adolescence that is the most vulnerable period of life for social acceptance and friendships. Besides, it needs to be developed online risk assessment methods by media analyses before presenting cases in the news or hospitals and focused on children and adolescent psychiatric disorders.[8] Finally, health care professionals, parents and teachers should be aware of the online contents and supervise offspring's online traffic. And they must be aware of the possible adverse effects of online challenge games which are estimated to be associated with suicidal behaviors in children and adolescents.

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