

Ten Years Later Remembering Columbine and Reinforcing School Safety: Tips for School Staff

The 10th anniversary of the school shootings at Columbine High School on April 20th is likely to result in considerable media attention throughout the country. This may be an ideal time to highlight the positive steps your school is taking to support students and improve school safety. Schools have made tremendous progress in the past decade in terms of strategies to reduce violence of all types, and administrators and staff can take this opportunity to reinforce the important role that all members of the school community play in promoting safety.

Additionally, the “anniversary effect” can trigger intense feelings and reactions in children and adults who have been affected by this or similar tragedies (April also marks the second anniversary of the shootings at Virginia Tech). Spring is a time of increased stress and anxiety for students in normal times; this could be exacerbated by these anniversaries and the added stress being caused by the economic crisis. The following suggestions can help school staff best meet the needs of their students and school community.

Preparing for April 20, 2009

Don't underestimate the “anniversary effect.” While most schools will not focus on remembering the Columbine tragedy, some students and even faculty may be affected. The intensity and nature of reactions will vary depending on an individual's personal history and relationship to this or a similar tragedy. Schools that have experienced a violent death of a student or faculty member should be especially vigilant. The more immediate in time and in proximity to campus, the greater the likelihood that an anniversary will have an impact.

Be mindful of students' potential reactions. Many students will exhibit little to no change in emotion or behavior. Some will reexperience feelings of sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, or grief. Related symptoms may include disruptive behavior, reduced concentration, heightened volatility or sensitivity, withdrawal, etc. In most cases, symptoms will subside with adult reassurance and support. Some students may demonstrate intense, persistent reactions that warrant professional mental health intervention. Students at greatest risk are those who witnessed an act of violence or traumatic event, lost a loved one, or have mental health issues. Refer these students to appropriate school or community mental health professionals.

Plan how to handle the anniversary within school. Teachers and other school staff should work together before April 20th to develop a plan that meets the needs of the school community. The plan should address:

- Communications with students, staff, and parents
- How to handle classroom discussions
- Coordination with community safety and mental health services
- A review of school safety plans and procedures
- Policies and procedures of a referral system for high-risk students
- Decisions on whether to conduct memorial activities appropriate for your school

Let students' needs guide your approach. Schools with no significant connection to this or any similar tragedy will typically require less extensive preparations than schools whose students have been directly impacted. Most elementary school students will have little or no connection to the anniversary and no personal recollection of the event. Assess how students reacted in the wake of previous crises, as well as other indicators including behavior problems, substance abuse, suspensions, absenteeism, etc.

Be aware of other stressors. This is a very stressful time for many families and schools across the country. School staff should be aware of stress symptoms in students who may be affected by the economic crisis and be prepared to respond. School psychologists can provide tips on stress management and other coping strategies.

Be prepared for classroom discussions. Regardless of a direct connection to the Columbine tragedy, students may want to discuss the issues of violence and school safety as a result of extensive media coverage. Teachers should plan ahead how to incorporate (or not) such discussions into class time and be prepared to refer students who exhibit unusual or heightened concerns.

Know what to do if a student needs assistance. Don't try to serve as a mental health professional unless you are trained to do so. Be clear on how to obtain mental health assistance for your students, what resources are available, and whom to call. Your school psychologist is an excellent source for this assistance.

Communicate with parents. Consider sending relevant information home before April 20th. This will help everyone know what to expect and how to plan accordingly. Let parents know what the school is doing related to this anniversary and how the school maintains a safe and caring atmosphere at all times (see “Highlighting School Safety” below). Encourage parents to communicate any concerns they may have about their child’s reaction to the anniversary.

Highlight violence prevention programs and curricula currently being taught at school. Emphasize the efforts of the school to teach students alternatives to violence including peaceful conflict resolution and positive interpersonal relationship skills. Cite specific examples of curricula or behavioral supports at your school.

Encourage students to avoid excessive media coverage. The media are likely to dramatize the anniversary. Watching replays of the Columbine shooting coverage, predictions of future violence, or even stories about the history of targeted school violence can raise anxiety.

Stop any bullying or harassment immediately. Bullying and harassment undermine school safety and put some students at risk for dangerous behavior. Be very clear that harassment of any kind or of any one is unacceptable. Let students know you are there to help. Be visible and vigilant in common areas, such as hallways, lunchrooms, and locker rooms.

Determine whether a memorial activity is needed. Memorials allow people to come together to express their feelings, increase a sense of security, and reduce a sense of isolation and vulnerability. However, they will not be needed in most schools. Providing a memorial activity for students who do not need it may increase their anxiety. If a whole-school memorial activity is not appropriate, an individual or a small group of students may benefit from an activity as an effective venue for dealing with their anniversary reactions.

Highlighting School Safety: Proactive Strategies

There are a number of steps that administrators can take to reinforce the fact that schools are safe environments and increase student/adult comfort levels.

- Send a letter to parents explaining the school safety policies and crisis prevention efforts.
 - Remind students, staff, and parents of their important role in promoting school safety by following procedures and reporting unusual or concerning individuals or behavior.
 - Address the important balance between sufficient building security and providing students a healthy, nurturing, normal school environment.
 - Note safety measures such as the presence of security systems, limited access to school building and monitoring of school guests, and monitoring of the school parking lot and common areas.
 - Name school resource officers, local police partnerships, or security guards.
 - Review communication systems within the school district and with community responders.
 - This should also address how and where parents will be informed in the event of an emergency.
 - Highlight violence prevention programs and curriculum currently being taught in school. Emphasize the efforts of the school to teach students alternatives to violence including peaceful conflict resolution and positive interpersonal relationship skills.
- Be a visible, welcoming presence at school, greeting students and parents and visiting classrooms.
- Issue a press release about school district efforts to maintain safe and caring schools through clear behavioral expectations, positive behavior interventions and supports, and crisis planning and preparedness.
- Conduct a formal review of all school safety policies and procedures to ensure that emerging school safety issues are adequately covered in current school crisis plans and emergency response procedures. (Such reviews should be conducted at least annually.)
- Connect with community partners (emergency responders, area hospitals, victim’s assistance, etc.) to review emergency response plans and to discuss any short-term needs that may be obvious in response to the current crisis.
- Provide crisis training and professional development for staff based upon needs assessment.

Remind Parents: Open communication between home and school is critical to the safety and well-being of our students and your children. Let us know if you have a concern or question about school policies or your child’s safety. Know if your child’s friends have access to guns. Keep any guns in your house locked up and away from children of all ages.

Additional information on school safety, violence prevention, crisis response, and memorials is available online at www.nasponline.org.

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