



Tips for Teachers and Parents Following School and Community Violence



When a national tragedy occurs, such as a shooting at school, terrorist attack, or natural disaster, people will be confused or frightened—especially children. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel should help children cope by establishing a sense of safety and security. As more information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

Prepared by National Emergency Assistance Team 12-16-2012

General Tips for All Adults

- Model calm and controlled behaviors
- Reassure children that they are safe and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives
- Let children know that it is okay to feel upset
- Observe children's emotional state
- Tell children the truth and answer the questions they may have honestly



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Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.

Depending on the situation, point out factors that help insure their immediate safety and that of their community. Emphasize that schools are very safe and the recent shooting was a very rare event.

Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger/distress is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately. Reactions can be delayed so being vigilant is recommended.

Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Change in behavior, appetite and sleep pattern can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort.

Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

Reactions can be delayed so monitor for several weeks or longer.

General Tips for All Adults (continued)

- Stick to the facts
- Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate
- For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings
 - » Be a good listener!
- You may need extra help for those with special needs



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Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change.

Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy.

Upper middle school and high school students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community.

Staff and parents must consider how children with special needs respond to any form of stress and anticipate these and more extreme reactions following a crisis. Strategies that have been effective with these students in the past are the best strategies to implement now, understanding that steps might need to be more concrete and consequences more immediate.

General Tips for All Adults *(continued)*

- Monitor your own stress level
- Monitor social media (i.e. Internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Review safety procedures



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Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is okay to let children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

If possible, follow the social media that the youngsters in your school are using. Correct misconceptions and be aware of any mention of threats by students to self or others.

This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school or the community to whom to go to if they feel threatened or at risk.

What Parents Can Do

- Focus on your child over the week following the tragedy & offer extra reassurance about their safety
- Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games before bed
- Make time to talk with your children each day
- Let children express their emotions



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Tell your child you love them, that everything will be ok and try to help them understand what has happened.

Bed time activities are calming, can foster a sense of closeness and security. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask.

Let the children's questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues they may want to talk, such as hovering around you when you do dishes or yard work or after or before class. If you don't take the time to talk with your children, someone else will. Take some time to determine what to say.

Some children prefer writing, playing music or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing,, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.

What Parents Can Do *(continued)*

- Give plenty of hugs! Many children will want actual physical contact
- Safeguard your child's physical health
- Maintain a "normal" routine... *but don't be inflexible*
- Consider thinking and expressing hopeful thoughts



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Stay close to your children as your physical presence will reassure and comfort them.

Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise and nutrition.

Stick to your family's normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc. as much as possible, but **be flexible**. Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night. Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals and exercise. If disruptive patterns last more than a few weeks, seek out consultation from your doctor or mental health professional.

This may be a good time to write a poem or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings, while at the same time feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.

What Parents Can Do *(continued)*

- Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope
- Limit or stop TV viewing of these events, particularly if they impact your child or you; be aware if the TV or radio is on in the background
- Monitor Internet and social media, Twitter, and text messages (SMS/AIM)



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Schools are often a good place for children to regain a sense of normalcy. Being with friends and teachers can help. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children who need it.

Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion especially in young children. Adults need to be mindful of the content of the conversations they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful and angry comments that might be misunderstood. If your child must watch TV, watch with them for a brief time, then turn the set off. Don't sit mesmerized re-watching the same events over and over again.

Using social media Web sites is among the most common activity of today's children and adolescents. It is important that parents are aware of the nature of social media sites, given that not all of them are healthy environments.

School and social media such as Facebook can reveal disturbing information at times. Ask your child to alert you if they encounter threats or other such distressing information.

What Teachers Can Do

- Assure your students that they are safe
- Maintain structure and stability...Routine is good!
- Provide information directly to your students in a calm factual way and dispel rumors
- Seek support from school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses



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Schools are well prepared to take care of all children at all times. Schools are safe places. School staff works with your parents and public safety providers (local police and fire departments, emergency responders, hospitals, etc.) to keep you safe.

Routine helps to establish a sense of normalcy and can be reassuring. Teachers may however consider not having tests or major projects within the first several days following a tragedy.

When talking to children, explain things in simple factual terms and do not provide lot of details. Keep in mind the developmental level of your students as well (*see slide 3 for reference*).

Reassure students that School Psychologists and Counselors are available to talk to those who may need or want extra support.

What Teachers Can Do (continued)

- Be aware of students who may have recently experienced a personal tragedy or have a connection to the victim(s) in some way
- Be mindful of children who exhibit extreme anxiety, fear, or anger
- Be aware of those who appear too distant or quiet, which is "not their typical self"
- Know what community resources are available



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Even a child who has merely visited or seen the affected area on television may have a strong reaction. Provide these students extra support and leniency/compassion if necessary.

Refer children who exhibit extreme anxiety, fear or anger to mental health counselors in the school. Inform their parents.

Children may need extra counseling support so knowing what resources are available in your area is helpful. Alert crisis teams to assist in immediate concern areas.

Have a print out of resources available; also the local Mental Health service referral list.

What Teachers Can Do *(continued)*

- Conduct age appropriate classroom discussions and activities
- Provide an outlet for students' desire to help (e.g., letters of support to the impacted community, fundraising if appropriate, etc.)



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Teachers are not expected to provide all of the answers. You should ask questions and guide discussion, but not dominate it. Other activities can include art and writing projects, play acting, and physical games. Ask crisis team members for assistance if needed.

Consider making get well cards or sending letters to the families and survivors of the tragedy, or writing thank you letters to doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals as well as emergency rescue workers, firefighters and police. Also, “random acts of kindness” can be helpful. “Doing” can be very therapeutic.

Suggested points to emphasize when talking to children

- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand
- Sometimes people do terrible things that hurt others
- Stay away from guns and other weapons
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems
- Tell an adult if you or someone else hear or see someone threaten you or your classmates



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Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying.

They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from mental illness. Adults work hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others.

Tell an adult if you know that someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for violence.

Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

Students can be a good source of hearing of other threats. So help them identify who they would tell if they are threatened or if a classmate is threatened.

NASP Resources to Share

www.nasponline.org:

- » Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/talkingviolence.pdf
- » Managing Strong Emotional Reactions to Traumatic Events: Tips for Parents and Teachers
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/angermgmt_general.aspx
- » Helping Children Cope With Crisis: Care for Caregivers
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/CaregiverTips.pdf
- » Tips for School Administrators for Reinforcing School Safety
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/schoolsafety_admin.aspx



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NASP has excellent resources on a variety of relevant topics.

NASP represents school psychology and supports school psychologists to enhance the learning and mental health of all children and youth.



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