

This information is provided as a part of the Colorado School Safety Resource Center's commitment to provide consultation, resources, training, and technical assistance to foster safe and secure learning environments, positive school climates, and early intervention to prevent crisis situations.

Talking to Children about School Safety: Helpful Guidelines for School Personnel

Information for children should be based entirely on their need, developmental age, and relationship/proximity to the crisis event. The goal is to reassure students that although there is always a possibility of violence occurring in a school, the *probability* of a school experiencing a high profile violent act is extremely low. The following are some suggested helpful guidelines that can be adapted to your school or classroom or for parents. Also, see Key Messages handout.

Helpful Guidelines to Keep in Mind

1. **Any conversation with a student must be developmentally appropriate.**

Young children need brief simple information that should be balanced with reassurance that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. They are not able to process the complexities of violence in the same way that adolescents and young adults are prepared to discuss the issue. Young children often gauge how threatening or serious an event is by adult reactions. Listen for misinformation or misconceptions and share facts as developmentally appropriate. They respond well to basic assurance by adults and simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.

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

Upper middle school and high school students may have strong and varying opinions about causes of violence in school and society. They may share concrete suggestions about how to make the school safer and how to prevent such tragedies. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

2. **Keep communication open between schools and parents.**

Keep parents informed about how schools are responding to student questions and any type of support that has been available for students struggling with any crisis. If teachers working with older students choose to have classroom discussion about the event linked to their instructional activities,



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Supporting Safe and Positive Colorado Schools

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parents should be made aware of these activities and any suggestions for following up at home should be offered.

3. *Make time if children want to talk and observe children's emotional state.*

Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Watch for clues that they might want to talk, but understand that not all children will want or need to talk about these events. Encourage parents to talk with children, validate their feelings and observe their child's emotional state. Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Be aware of signs that children might be in distress, e.g., changes in behavior, anxiety, sleep problems, acting out, problems at school or with academic work.

4. *Be conscious of media exposure and what adults say about the event.*

Limit television viewing, (be aware if the television is on in common areas). Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to comments that might be misunderstood.

5. *Reinforce student strengths and focus on normal routines and activities.*

Some high profile school tragedies may prompt a public response depending upon the developmental levels of the students and the school or community's history of related events, or proximity to the crisis. Normal routines help establish a sense of calm and predictability important to maintaining effective learning environments.

6. *Consider the cultures, traditional, religious and family/community values of students in any school response.*

It is important that schools respect the values, traditions, beliefs and customs of the students and their families impacted by the crisis. Remember not everyone processes strong emotions through conversation. Some children and adults may need to respond through art, poetry, prayer, or activity.

7. *Find support if needed.*

Encourage students to seek out a mental health staff member or counselor if they have a continuing need to talk about the event. It is also important that caring adults find support and have an opportunity to process events away from students, if needed. Take good care of the caregivers and seek support for yourself, if needed!

Adapted from:

National Association of School Psychologists (2006). *Tips for school administrators for reinforcing school safety*. Bethesda, MD: NASP.



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