

Talking Points: Helping Children Following School Violence

School violence is shocking, and disturbing to children on so many levels. One is that it disrupts the way that they see the world. When threat is minimal, children see the world as a safe and meaningful place and they feel a sense of control over their environment. When threat is high, children feel out of control, unsafe and that the world has lost its meaning. Children can begin to worry that dangerous things can befall them or those they love. When violence is perpetrated by adults, the very people that children look to for protection, the impact is powerful. Additionally, schools are places where children are supposed to feel safe and be free from harm.

Parents and school personnel can be helpful in mitigating the emotional effects of school violence on children. Below are some strategies for dealing with these tragedies and assisting youth in regaining their sense of safety and security.

- **Monitor the amount of TV watching**
These kinds of events attract mass media attention. Frightening, dramatic and sad images are often repetitively displayed in newsprint, on television or radio. Watching these kinds of scenes may fixate the images of violent death and increase the child's feelings of vulnerability. It is important to monitor what children are viewing and limit their exposure to upsetting media coverage.
- **Ask your children what they have heard or what other kids are saying.**
Give children accurate information and correct any misinformation. Gear the information to their age and refrain from focusing on the graphic details of the incident. Children may ask what homicide means. While it is not necessary to go into detail, you may want to say "It means that someone killed another person; it was not an accident."

Children often have many developmental issues regarding the integrity of the body. Hearing about the death of someone close to their age, especially a death that was violent can increase anxiety about their own body. Some children may ask specific questions like "What happens when you get shot in the head?" You can answer the question in a more clinical way, avoiding the graphic details. For example: "When you get shot in the head, it can make the heart stop working and the person dies. Sometimes a person is not injured as badly and they can go to the hospital and get taken care of by the doctors, nurses and their families."

- **Find out what concerns your child has and take them seriously**
Children often feel more vulnerable than adults because of their size and their limited emotional resources and experiences. Because of this, some of their fears may seem trivial or unrealistic to adults but can occupy the child's thoughts and dreams just the same. It is important to take their concerns seriously and offer reassurance.

You can ask children "After hearing about these kinds of things, what do you think most kids worry about?"

- **Tackle the tough questions**
Children will ask questions like "why did this happen?" Imbedded in this question are several others; "how could an adult do this to children?"; "how could a child like me get so out of control and kill someone?" and "could this happen to me or to people that I love?"

1. **Why did this happen?**

Explain to children “we may not know the exact reason why this violence occurred, but it is clear that the person that did these things was very troubled and was not able to think clearly about how to deal with their thoughts and feelings. The result was that they were not able to control their impulses or urges to hurt others. They also did not tell anyone about these thoughts and feelings in time for others to help them figure out good ways to fix their problems without hurting anyone. Sometimes a person acts out violently because of a mental disorder.”

It is important for children to know that these behaviors are infrequent, and the majority of people that suffer with mental disorders are not dangerous. In our society, mental illness still carries with it a certain amount of stigma which often prevents people from reaching out for treatment. It is important to try to refrain from perpetuating incorrect notions that all mentally ill people are capable of violent behavior. They can be told, “it is important for you to know that most people who suffer with problems like mental illness, are not dangerous, and you do not need to be afraid of them”.

This is a good time to teach the importance of help seeking and talking about problems. Explain to children “sometimes people have thoughts and feelings or problems that make them feel hurt, confused, or scared inside. While they may never do what these people have done, it is often very helpful to have someone to talk to who can help them solve a problem and feel better. Ask your child “who would you talk to if you were feeling hurt or scared or confused inside?” Have them name several people so their support system is enlarged.

2. How could a child get so out of control and kill someone?

When a youth is the perpetrator of violence, it can often instill fear around a child’s own angry feelings and impulses. To help children understand this, adults can say “while it is not unusual for people to have thoughts about wanting to strike out at someone they are angry at, most people control those thoughts and feelings and don’t act on them and hurt others. Most people who are not able to control their urges or impulses to seriously hurt or kill others are usually suffering from serious problems. The causes of these problems are often complicated.”

It is a good time to talk with your child about positive ways to handle anger since everyone feels it from time to time. Ask your child “what helpful things can you do when you feel angry?” You can give them some ideas such as talking about the problem with an adult or a friend or a counselor; writing in a journal; doing something physical like kicking a soccer ball or jogging; listening to calming music; watching a television show; leaving the room and taking a calming time out or counting to 10 and taking some deep breaths..

It is also a good time to talk with kids about maltreatment of others through bullying, taunting, or ostracizing, and help them to develop empathy for the feelings of others. Talk with them about ways of helping when they see bullying happen such as not participating in the bullying or laughing at what the bully says, helping the bullied child walk away from the bully, or offering words of comfort to the bullied child such as “don’t listen to them, they are just being mean, and it isn’t right.” Help your child feel comfortable telling an adult such as a teacher, principal, guidance counselor or a parent about bullying behavior that happens to them or their peers.

3. Could this happen to me or to people that I care about?

To balance the enormity of violent acts, it is important to explain to children that “these kinds of events are very unusual. Most adults do not want to hurt children but want to protect them, and most children do not hurt other people when they get angry.” You can speculate with them about the number of schools in the United States (or the world for that matter) and compare that number with the number of schools in which this kind of violence has occurred. This is not to minimize the horrific impact of these events but to put them into a perspective that will help children regain a feeling of safety.

It is important to bring the discussion back to the child’s own experiences and talk about the adults in their life who love them and are there to protect them. You can explain “the adults in your school such as the superintendent, the principal, teachers and others, work very closely with the police and community leaders to make sure your school is safe and secure”. You can talk with youth about the things their school does to practice safety

procedures during the school year and even have them show you what they have been told to do if there is a fire, or an intruder etc. Teach them about trusting their own 'gut' feelings and to tell an adult if they hear or see something that another child or an adult says or does that makes them feel 'funny inside' or unsafe. You can say to them: "even if you are unsure about whether or not this is something to be worried about tell an adult anyway. The adults will figure out a good way to deal with the problem." Discuss the kinds of behaviors that should never be kept secret. You can ask children a question like "so, tell me what kinds of things do you think are important to tell an adult about?", or "what kinds of things should never be kept a secret even if someone tells you not to tell?"

If you notice that children are using inappropriate humor or bravado, it is helpful to not criticize the behavior or embarrass them but to address the underlying feelings. For example, if a child makes a joke about the way a child was killed, it is important to say "sometimes when people are really upset about something they have heard or seen they make a joke to help them deal with their feelings of fear or upset." You could also address bravado by saying "sometimes people act like they don't care after hearing upsetting or frightening news because they may think that others would see them as weak or acting like a baby if they admitted that they were upset or scared or even felt like crying." It doesn't matter if the child denies these feelings or disagrees with your statements. The important thing is you have opened up the possibility for the child to own the feelings even if they own them privately, and for their peers to understand the reaction in a different way.

- **Keep the routine**

Routine provides us with a sense of security. The routine of school, after school activities and sports are important to mitigate the feeling that the 'world is out of control'.

- **Spend time together as a family**

Increase opportunities for play, fun and relaxation. Connecting with friends and family members helps children feel there is a safety net of people around them.

- **Allow some time for extra comforting**

Children often need some additional time for soothing and comforting when they are dealing with upsetting circumstances. Extra hugs, cuddling, and story telling (even middle school youth enjoy having their parents read to them), are helpful. After these kinds of incidents, children and teens may have nightmares or fears. It might be helpful to allow the child to sleep in close proximity to the parents for a bit of time. Sleeping bags or cots could be used for a few nights.

If you find that your child is having difficulty staying in school because of anxiety, you may want to arrange with the counseling department to allow one phone call to you during lunch. Do all you can to help your child go to school and remain there.

- **Process your own feelings**

Children will take their cues from the adults around them. It is important for the adults to take care of themselves and their feelings as well as their child's. If you are feeling upset, anxious or fearful it will be important for you to find a trusted adult to talk to. Avoid talking about your fears in front of your children. To help you deal with your fears and concerns, it will be important to talk with other parents and to school officials about the protocols they have in place for emergencies. It might be helpful to ask your school to send home a notice about their policies and procedures following a crisis or to hold a meeting so parents can ask questions.

- **Monitor your child's behavior and seek assistance if necessary**

While the signs and symptoms below can be normal in the early days and weeks following a crisis, if they do not abate or they increase, additional help may be required. If you have concerns about your child, do not hesitate to contact your school's counseling department or your local community behavioral health center.

- Somatic complaints (stomachaches, headaches and muscle pain)
- Changes in eating
- Changes in behavior (increase in irritability, aggression, anger, or becoming more fearful and clinging)

- Changes in school performance
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares
- Inability to stop thinking about the event
- Refusing to attend school
- Worrying excessively about something bad happening to them or someone they love