



Helping Children Cope With School Violence

Incidents of school violence have shocked and saddened the nation, and left concerned parents wondering how their children could be affected. This guide offers helpful information on how to speak to your child(ren) about the violence; how to help ease their anxieties and fears; and how to protect them from future violence.

How Will Children Respond to a Tragedy?

With the media's coverage of acts of violence in our schools, virtually all children will be aware of school violence. Yet how they respond will vary depending on a child's age, personality and maturity level. Some children, particularly those age nine and under, may be unable to grasp the reality of the tragedy, or comprehend that violence could affect their own lives. Others may be frightened that something could happen to them. And still others may attempt to protect themselves through denial, cynicism or apathy. Regardless of how your child responds, he or she will be looking to you for answers, guidance and support.

How Can Parents Help?

Speak to your child about any incidents of school violence, openly and honestly, adapting your conversations to the age of your child. Children deserve honest answers, regardless of their age. You do not have to provide every detail, but don't hold back too much information either; instill trust in your child while helping him or her understand what happened.

Owen, father of an 11-year-old boy, states, "There was a bomb scare at Charlie's school last week, and even though it was a false alarm, he is afraid to go back to school. What can I do to reassure him? Is there anything I—and other parents—can do to make our schools safe?"

In addition, the following tips may help:

Encourage your child to express his or her feelings. Children usually feel better when they can talk about their feelings. To help your child sort out his or her feelings, ask specific questions such as "How do you feel? Does it make you feel scared? What worries you the most?" Encourage your child to be honest and open, and listen carefully for clues about hidden feelings or worries.

Reassure your child. Respond to your child's feelings; acknowledge his or her fears; and continually reassure your child that he or she is safe. Stress that this was a rare incident, but avoid making false promises such as "Nothing like this will ever happen to you." Instead, offer your love, support and guidance and say things such as "I am here to protect you and to help keep you safe." In addition, remind your child that his or her teachers and the police are also looking out for his or her safety.

Monitor the media. Monitor and limit the amount of television your child watches. If your child sees disturbing footage of incidents of school violence, his or her fears and anxieties may escalate.

Speak to your child's school administrators.

Ask your child's teachers and/or school principal how they have addressed school violence. Many schools speak to students about safety issues, and reassure them that they are doing everything possible to keep the children safe.

Pay close attention to your child. If your child was involved or a witness to an incident of violence, pay close attention to your child's behavior. If you notice any unusual behavior, it may be a reaction to stress, fear or trauma. Learn how to recognize warning signs (as described in the next section) and seek professional help from a counselor, social worker, psychologist or other professional if necessary.

If your child expresses fear of going back to school, be sympathetic and talk to your child about his or her anxieties—but convince your child to be brave. Explain that it will take time for him or her to confront and gradually overcome anxieties—and reassure him or her that you will help. In addition, speak to your child's teacher about your child's anxieties, and ask him or her to provide additional guidance, support and encouragement. If your child's school phobia persists for an extended period of time, consult a professional for additional guidance and help.

Signs of Anxiety In Children

Children react to fear, stress or trauma in different ways. Children that were directly involved in an incident may suffer from severe anxiety or trauma—and will probably need professional help. All children, however, may be affected by the violence. Here are some signs to watch for in your child:

- ♦ Disrupted sleep patterns—frequent nightmares and/or insomnia
- ♦ Changes in eating habits—loss of appetite or overeating
- ♦ Decline in school performance
- ♦ Lack of concentration
- ♦ Irritability or prolonged depression

- ♦ Separation anxiety
- ♦ Unusual clinginess
- ♦ Regression

Remember, these symptoms are common reactions to anxiety. However, if symptoms persist for longer than six weeks and disrupt your child's daily routine, seek help from a social worker, pediatrician or psychologist. A professional can help your child deal with his or her emotions and can provide valuable tips and guidance to parents.

In addition, ask your employer if they offer an EAP (Employee Assistance Program). An EAP counselor can provide counseling on a wide range of issues, including stress, anxiety, dealing with violence and more.

What Can Parents Do to Help Prevent Violence?

Each time a violent incidence occurs in our schools, parents want to know what they can do to protect their children. Though it will take a concentrated nationwide effort, the following tips may help:

- ♦ Alert your child to stay away from children who threaten violence and to report any threats or suspicious behaviors to school officials or to you.
- ♦ Keep the lines of communication open. Encourage your child to come to you with any concerns, problems or fears. In turn, ask your child questions about his or her friends, activities and feelings.
- ♦ Clear up misconceptions. Children frequently cite the media and their peers as their primary sources of information about violence, yet most cannot distinguish between dramatic images and actual dangers. For example, most children mistakenly believe that only strangers can be dangerous. Clear up any misconceptions and rather than simply warning against strangers, teach your child how to detect uncomfortable situations or actions.
- ♦ Take a course in mediation skills so you can help your child or others peacefully work out problems and conflicts. Ask your school, police department, YMCA, or local hospital or counseling center if any courses are offered for adults and/or children.

- ◆ Be a good role model. Do not resort to violence for any reason and continually provide examples of non-violent solutions to problems.
- ◆ Educate your child about guns and weapons and strictly forbid him or her from using them. Remind your child that it is illegal and potentially deadly!
- ◆ If you have any guns in your house, they should be locked away unloaded. Ammunition should be locked away separate from all guns. Additionally, all gun owners and their children should take a gun safety course.
- ◆ Work with schools and parent organizations to offer students self-control and stress-management courses.
- ◆ Help develop recreational and educational programs for young people in the community, so they will have opportunities for fun, constructive activities with adult mentors and supervisors.
- ◆ Work with educators, local government, law enforcement, and others in the community to solve problems involving crime, drugs, harassment and bullying.
- ◆ Help children get involved in volunteer activities. When children feel they are making an important contribution, they are less likely to turn to violence.
- ◆ Teach your child to express frustrations and anger in positive ways (as described in the next section).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, pay attention to warning signs and symptoms that may indicate that your child—or another—is troubled. Keep an eye out for at-risk behaviors such as: skipping school; decline in grades; change in friends; temper tantrums; alcohol or drug use; carrying weapons, etc. These symptoms indicate that a child needs help—and may have a tendency toward violence. Talk to the child and/or seek help immediately.

Teach Your Child Self-Control

To decrease violence in our schools, parents should teach their child(ren) effective ways to deal with anger or frustration. Ideally, parents should teach these skills from a young age; even by age three, most children can understand non-violent ways to deal with anger and frustration. As children grow older, self-control becomes even more important. The following tips may help:

Teach your child to:

- ◆ Respect him or herself and others.
- ◆ Avoid fighting. When angry, cool off, talk it out, or walk away.
- ◆ Use words, rather than weapons, to resolve conflicts.
- ◆ Never carry a knife, gun or other weapon. Not only is it against the law, but weapons can kill.
- ◆ Avoid alcohol or other drugs. Not only does it alter a person's judgement, but it can encourage violent behavior.
- ◆ Stay away from kids who think fighting and violence is "cool."

If everyone takes a more proactive role in helping keep our children and our schools safe, hopefully we can put an end to some of the violence that has plagued our schools in recent years.

Helpful Resources

The following resources and books may provide additional information and support:

Web Sites

Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program

<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS>

The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program is the federal government's primary vehicle for reducing drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and violence, through education and prevention activities in our nation's schools.

National School Safety Center

<http://www.nssc1.org>

The National School Safety Center was created by presidential directive in 1984 to meet the growing need for additional training and preparation in the area of school crime and violence prevention.

Center for the Prevention of School Violence

<http://www.cpsv.org>

The Center's public awareness campaign keeps the public informed about all aspects of the problem of school violence as well as what can be done to solve it.

National Alliance for Safe Schools

<http://www.safeschools.org/>

This not-for-profit, training and technical assistance organization is dedicated to the promotion of an orderly educational environment.

Suggested Reading

Everything You Need to Know About School Violence, by Anna Kreiner. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 1995.

Written for children in grades six through eight, this book provides a thoughtful discussion of violence in schools, complete with examples of incidents and suggestions for coping.

Practical School Security: Basic Guidelines for Safe and Secure Schools, by Kenneth S.

Trump. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1998.

A thorough guide to creating and implementing a workable safety and security plan in schools.

Safe Schools: A Handbook for Violence Prevention, by Ronald D. Stephens.

Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, 1995.

This book includes school safety plans to show readers how to assess school safety and develop, implement and evaluate a comprehensive safe school plan.

Safe Schools: A Security and Loss Prevention Plan, by James Barry Hylton. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996.

Drawing from his career in law enforcement and security, Hylton discusses a wide range of security programs and measures for schools.

Waging Peace in Our Schools, by Linda Lantieri, Janet Patti and Marian Wright Edelman. New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

These three prominent conflict-resolution activists argue that schools must educate the heart as well as the mind. This book is a practical guide, filled with stories, ideas and advice for using innovative techniques to create "peaceable classrooms."

For more information on related topics, please refer to other publications in the LifeCare® education series.

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