

## Kidpower Safety Tips: Gun Violence at School

*By Kidpower Executive Director/Co-Founder Irene van der Zande*

When young people are aware of the possibility of gun violence at school, either because gun violence is common in their community or because they have heard a story in the news, they need calm, confident, matter-of-fact adult leadership. Here are tips adults can use to help kids feel safer and more confident:

- 1. If there has been a shooting, explain what happened in a calm, age-appropriate way.** Focus on reassurance rather than repeatedly going over the details. Avoid using words like "sick" or "problems;" children might worry this could happen if their loved ones get sick or have problems.
- 2. Listen, stay calm, and get adult support for your own feelings.** When kids do share worries, fears, and problems, listen respectfully. What they say might be upsetting for you to hear. Be supportive without burdening children with your own concerns. Turn to other adults, not kids, if you need help with your own feelings.
- 3. Give direct, practical, clear information to put things in perspective.** Say that if someone had a gun, that would be scary, and someone could get hurt. It's also true that even in areas with lots of gun violence, most shooters miss a moving target most of the time. Most people who are shot do not die, they heal. Tell kids they have power they can use to help themselves stay safe, and you will help them practice using it.
- 4. Practice being aware and getting away from a weapon quickly and calmly.** Remind kids that a weapon in the hands of a young person is always a safety problem, even if the kid is not using it in the moment. Have kids pretend to notice a weapon in a backpack and then practice calmly and quietly leaving.
- 5. Practice lying if necessary in order to be safe, leave, and get help.** Give kids permission to lie and break promises if they need to in order to be safe, get away, and get help from adults. Let them imagine you are a person who is mad, upset, or joking around and has a weapon. Let kids practice lies like, "Yes, it's a cool gun, I won't tell anyone you have it," "You're right, I'm weak," and other lies to de-escalate so they can get away safely to get help.
- 6. Match their awareness with skills practiced in a calm, matter-of-fact way.** Many children, even in areas with very little crime or violence, worry about guns because they are so common in the media. They benefit from hearing and practicing everything in the above tips. In communities where gun violence is common, even very young children may have truly legitimate fears about serious dangers like drive-by-shootings on their playground. They benefit from additional practices. Adults may not have power to change the street violence kids face, but they have power to help kids feel more prepared to take action. They can confidently lead kids to the playground, decide with them where 'safety' would be if someone were shooting, and then let them practice running there and getting help to be safe.
- 7. Set up policies so kids feel safe telling adults about weapons at school.** Kids often don't tell adults about weapons or other school violence because they don't believe adults will keep them safe. They worry about being targets of revenge. This happens in areas with high rates of crime and in areas where gun violence is rare. Take action to ensure that the safety and privacy of students who make reports are protected so that everyone is safer.