

## **Armed Violence in Schools ~ Solutions for Empowering Children**

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Violence in schools anywhere can leave parents and children everywhere feeling overwhelmed with worry. Right after the shootings at Columbine High School, a six-year-old girl in a workshop at a private school asked me, "What if someone comes to our school and starts shooting everybody?" Along with all of the other adults in the room, I looked into her little face and felt ill that she even had to wonder about it.

Violence in schools becomes heartbreakingly and urgently on our minds each time a new tragedy takes place. The threat of violence looms over all children no matter where they live or what their family situation is. It is important to address the concerns of children as gun violence is occurring more frequently and is ever-present in the media. Although nothing works all of the time, the following suggestions can help children to feel less helpless and more prepared in the face of armed violence in schools.

### **Be a Safe Calm Person to Talk To**

Children of any age need to know that adults are willing to listen to their fears. It is important that adults treat children with respect when they talk about their problems. You need to find a balance between listening and supporting without burdening children with your own fears.

Because of your own anxieties, it might be tempting to try to make children feel better in the moment by pretending that the situation is not really that bad. If you act like something is too terrifying even to talk about, this will make children more afraid. They might want to protect you by not sharing their fears and this can leave them feeling really alone.

It can also be hard not to overreact and sound panic-stricken yourself. If their adults are overwhelmed and afraid, this can be traumatic for children. The subject of violence in schools can, of course, be upsetting for adults, so be sure to get support for your own feelings from other adults if you need it.

Children need adults to listen and explain what is happening and what they should do as calmly and matter-of-factly as possible. Tell children to tell you if **anyone** is making them uncomfortable about **anything**. Having children in the habit of talking to you will help you to judge whether or not a situation is potentially dangerous. Violence in schools sometimes grows from ongoing problems between children, and with an understanding of what's happening at school, adults may be able to prevent some problems from growing.

### **Make Sure it is Safe to Tell At School**

It is your job as an adult to take charge of the environments in which your children spend time as best you can. Make sure that your school has a plan for dealing with armed violence just like any other emergency. Make sure that adults are trained in how to deal with a child who makes a report about another child, because violence in schools can escalate if problems are not managed in a way that protects students who make reports.

One girl who was in a very exclusive school in a quiet neighborhood heard a boy bragging about his gun. When she told the principal, the gun was found and the boy was suspended. However, the principal handled the situation in a way that caused the girl to be identified and then he put her back into the classroom. The boy's friends threatened to kill her. The trauma she went through could have been prevented if the school officials had understood how important it is to protect the identity of children who tell in order to prevent violence in schools.

### **What Adults Can Say to Children About What Happens to People's Minds and Bodies in an Emergency**

You can tell children, "Any time you have an emergency--like a car wreck, an earthquake, a flood, a tornado, or somebody being dangerous-- your first feeling will most likely be disbelief. You will probably think, 'It's not true. It is impossible! This can't be!' The sooner you can get over your disbelief and see what is actually happening, the sooner you can start to protect yourself."

"Next, you will probably experience some very strong feelings because of chemical in your body called adrenaline. Adrenaline can make you feel full of energy, or it can make you feel shaky, weak or sick to your stomach. Sometimes all of these feelings come at the same time, which can be a bit confusing. Your body might go into a panic and want to run or freeze or start fighting, whether it makes sense or not. The **good news** is that you can learn to use the energy from your adrenaline to give you **lots of power** while still thinking clearly so you can make the safest choices for yourself. If you practice the safest way to handle different emergencies, you will be able to act quickly because your body will already know what to do."

Using role play to rehearse handling different emergencies, including potential violence in schools, can prepare children to react effectively and quickly -- and to have their adrenaline work for them instead of against them.

### **Violence in Schools and Elsewhere: What Adults Can Say to Children About Getting Away, Getting Hurt, and Getting Help**

Most children want to know what to do if the worst happens. It is less upsetting to imagine a plan than to keep imagining disaster. You can tell children, "The safest thing to do almost always if someone starts waving a gun or a knife or starts shooting is to get away right away as quickly and quietly as you can. You will almost always be safer if you keep running away even if the person with the gun tells you to stop. Even if the person is saying he or she will hurt someone else if you run, the best chance you have for helping that person is to run away and get help." This is useful advice for violence in general, not just violence in schools.

It is good for children to have a safety plan for how to get out of a building in case of danger – whether the

danger comes from a fire or a person. You can say, "Your job is to get out of the building as far from the danger as possible. So let's think about everywhere you might be and how you might get out if you need to. You can go out the door or, if you have to, jump out of the window. If you cannot get out and the danger is from a fire, look for a place near a window, away from the fire and yell for help. If the danger is from a person and you cannot get out, look for a place to hide that covers up all of you."

It is worth getting injured to get away from someone who is shooting. One of the boys at Columbine escaped by throwing himself out the window. He got cut up badly, but he survived and is having a good life. Most of the children who were standing still in shock or who were hiding under the tables got shot.

You can tell children, "You might need to get hurt in order to get away. If a gun shoots, it will be loud. The great thing about adrenaline is that it can help you to run fast, even if you are hurt or start to bleed. If you are hurt by a gun, you can get better most of the time, just like you get better most of the time when you fall down and get hurt and bloody."

Tell children, "Once you get out, as soon as you safely can, find an adult you trust to go to for help. Now, let's think about different places you might be and where you could go to get help after you got out." Take the time to brainstorm ideas about getting out and getting help with the children. Teach children how to call 911; their full name, address, and telephone number; and how to use different types of telephones.

### **What Adults Can Say to Children About Kids Having Weapons At School**

You can tell children that, "Sometimes kids like to joke or brag about having or using guns or bombs or about hurting animals or people. Most of the time, they are just pretending, but once in a while, they are not. If someone is talking like this, this person might have big problems and I want you to tell me about it as soon as you can."

Young people need to know how to get away from anyone who makes them uncomfortable without saying what they think. This might mean that they have to lie to stay safe and say, "Of course I won't tell." or even, "Yes, I think that's cool." They might have to agree with the person who is being weird or scary, even with a big insult like saying, "Yes, you're right, my mom is a creep (or worse)."

It is urgent that, if someone is acting in a way that could be dangerous, children go an adult they trust and say something like, "This is about my safety and about the safety of others here at our school. I need you to promise to protect me from other people knowing that I am the one who is telling you this. I want you to call my parents (or another safe adult) right away so they can be with me."

If children don't feel safe with any adult at school, it is important that they tell their parents or another safe adult as soon as they can. The school needs to know if there is possible danger. In some situations it may be necessary to make a telephone call to the school anonymously--which means not telling your name--to someone in charge, like the principal. Anonymous telephone calls or notes will only be taken seriously if there are as many specifics as possible included in the message.

### **Whether and How to Practice**

If children are really worried about somebody shooting at school, or any other kind of emergency, practicing can help them manage that worry. In the private school workshop that I mentioned at the beginning, when the little girl asked her question, the anxiety in the room was huge. All of the children, and their teachers and parents, were looking at me, needing an answer.

I said, "Television makes it seem as if scary things like this are happening all the time. But this isn't true. Most

of us will live long happy lives and never have to worry about somebody starting to shoot people at school. But it is good to know what to do in an emergency. Most of the time, the safest thing you can do is leave quickly and quietly when someone is acting violent. Just get up and get out. Suppose that I started acting dangerous. Look around and see if you know how to get out of this room.... now, all of you, very quietly leave the room."

Thirty children found one of the three exits and silently streamed outside. Then they came back and we went on with our workshop.

### **Think about the Underlying Issues**

In order to create long-term change, each of us needs to find our own ways of helping to address the underlying issues that lead to violence in schools and in our communities. Important actions can include:

- Establishing school policies that make threats, harassment, and violence in schools against the rules with clearly defined consequences.
- Providing education and policies to stop prejudice, bullying, harassment, and any other form of violence in schools.
- Mentoring a troubled child.
- Monitoring and being aware of the ways in which television, video games, music, the Internet and movies normalize violence for our children.
- Educating school personnel, law enforcement officials, and parents about warning signals that can precede violence in schools.
- Making sure that school counseling is available to families whose children show signals of problems as early in their lives as possible.
- Helping young people learn conflict resolution, self-protection, boundary-setting, and confidence skills through organizing and supporting programs such as Kidpower.

Violence in schools can indeed feel like an overwhelming problem. However, by taking steps both to reduce the potential of violence and also to help children develop safety plans and habits, we can promote safer learning environments.