

Schools Can Help Kids Cope with School Violence

Americans have been thrust into a global climate of anger, fear, violence and war. Our children are trying to make sense of the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and know that the threat of terrorism continues. Now, the approaching anniversary of a tragic date and the media images that come with it may trigger a wide range of emotions in children, whether they reveal them to us or not.

Signs of trouble coping with those emotions may be seen in school. They may include fearfulness about attending school; headaches/stomachaches/other physical complaints; loss of interest in friends or activities; difficulty concentrating; frequent worrying; talk of death or suicide; increased tearfulness, irritability or anger; and new fears about such things as airplanes, tall buildings, tunnels, or being alone. Children with mental health problems or those who have experienced past trauma may be the most affected.

Children's reactions to the anniversary may be heavily influenced by those of adults around them. The reactions of teachers and other school personnel are key in helping children decide whether the world is a safe or scary place.

Talking to kids about their feelings is a good way to help them cope with their anxieties surrounding school shootings and violence. Helping them take positive steps to work out those feelings is even better.

General Tips for Schools

- To deflect the anxiety of the day, kids could occupy themselves doing something positive. Volunteering at a pet shelter or nursing home could be a great school project. Planting trees on school grounds is another idea. See what ideas you can come up with together and help kids develop an action plan. Your decision to support them in the activity could be just what they need to deal with the anniversary of this tragic event.
- Provide teachers with program suggestions for the anniversary date. Encourage age-appropriate projects that will help children share their feelings such as writing stories or poetry, art work, even making “worry dolls” to which they can talk. Another idea is a class box where they can anonymously submit their thoughts and concerns. Selections from the box would guide future class discussion.
- Give children the option to opt out of planned activities if they are uncomfortable.
- Hold mental health programs and screenings at school. Make sure you have enough trained professionals on staff to assist, including providing referrals.

For Pre-School-Aged Children

- Reassure preschoolers that they're safe. Provide extra comfort and contact during the day.

- Get a better understanding of their feelings about the events going on in the community or around the country. Encourage them to draw pictures, and then discuss them. This offers insight into children's particular concerns or fears.
- How you say something is perhaps as important as what you say. Three- to five-year-olds look to important adults in their lives to gauge their reactions and decide how they should feel. If they see worry and fear in the adults around them, they are likely to become worried and afraid. But if routine and calmness reigns, most preschoolers will perceive the event as something in the past, not the present.

For Grade School-Aged Children:

- Expect questions from this age group. Try to answer them in simple and clear language. Explain that the police and many others have been working hard to keep us safe.
- Be honest. False reassurance doesn't help this age group. Don't say nobody will ever die again from school violence. Children know this isn't true. Instead say, "Adults are working very hard to make things safe."
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Part of keeping an open dialogue with children is not being afraid to say that you don't have all the answers. When you don't, explain that terrorism and war are very complicated and things happen that even adults don't understand.
- For Middle and High School-Aged Youth
- Get teens to open up about what they've heard about the violent event. Use the opportunity to correct any misinformation or stereotypes they may have acquired.
- This age group may ask very technical or even grisly questions that may seem off the wall to you. Take each question seriously and do the best you can to answer it.
- Encourage them to work out their own positions on the issues of violence. This is an age when kids are developing personal ethics, a process you can support with open discussion and debate.

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.