Families and school personnel play a critical role in helping to reestablish a sense of normalcy and security for children after an act of violence occurs. Follow these key reminders and visit www.nasponline.org/children-and-violence to learn more.

**Reaffirm Safety**
Emphasize that schools are very safe. Let children speak about their feelings and validate all reactions to the event. Support the appropriate expression of their feelings and help to put them in perspective.

**Make Time to Talk**
Let children’s questions guide the information provided. Be patient and look for clues that a child wants to talk. Young children may need concrete activities (e.g., imaginative play) and some older children may prefer writing or playing music.

**Keep Explanations Developmentally Appropriate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Elementary</th>
<th>Upper Elementary &amp; Early Middle</th>
<th>Upper Middle &amp; High</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide simple information balanced by assurance of safety.</td>
<td>Answer questions and assist in separating reality from fantasy.</td>
<td>Emphasize student role in safety &amp; how to access support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Review Safety Procedures**
Help children identify one adult at school and in the community that they can go to if they feel threatened or at risk. Review procedures and safeguards in school and home settings.

**Observe Children’s Emotional State**
Some will not express themselves verbally but changes in behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns can indicate anxiety or stress. Seek help from a mental health professional for those with more intense reactions.

**Maintain a Normal Routine**
Keep a regular schedule to reassure and promote physical and mental health. Encourage maintenance of school work and extracurricular activities but do not push children if they seem overwhelmed. Limit TV exposure.

For additional guidance, visit www.nasponline.org/safety-and-crisis.

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Hablarles a los niños sobre violencia: consejos para padres y educadores

Las familias y el personal escolar desempeñan una función fundamental en ayudar a restablecer una sensación de normalidad y seguridad en los niños después de que ocurre un acto de violencia. Siga estos recordatorios clave y visite www.nasponline.org/children-and-violence para obtener más información.

**Reafirmar la seguridad**
Haga hincapié en que las escuelas son muy seguras. Permita que los niños hablen sobre sus sentimientos y valide todas las reacciones manifestadas ante el suceso. Apoye las expresiones adecuadas de sus sentimientos y ayude a ponerlos en perspectiva.

**Tómese tiempo para hablar**
Permíta que las preguntas formuladas por los niños orienten la información proporcionada. Tenga paciencia y busque indicios sobre los que el niño desee hablar. Es posible que los niños pequeños necesiten realizar actividades concretas (p. ej., juegos de imaginación) y algunos niños mayores prefieran escribir o tocar música.

**Mantenga explicaciones adecuadas al nivel de desarrollo**
- **Primeros años de la educación primaria**: Proporcione información sencilla y equilibrada por una garantía de seguridad.
- **Últimos años de la educación primaria y primeros años de la educación media**: Responda preguntas y ayude a separar la realidad de la fantasía.
- **Últimos años de la educación media y educación secundaria**: Haga hincapié en el rol del estudiante en materia de seguridad y en cómo obtener apoyo.

**Revisar los procedimientos de seguridad**
Ayúdeles a los niños a identificar a un adulto en la escuela y la comunidad a quien puedan acudir en caso de sentirse amenazados o en riesgo. Revise los procedimientos y las medidas de seguridad en los entornos de la escuela y el hogar.

**Observar el estado emocional de los niños**
Algunos no se expresarán oralmente, pero los cambios en el comportamiento, el apetito o los hábitos de sueño pueden indicar ansiedad o estrés. Busque la ayuda de un profesional en salud mental para tratar a quienes tengan reacciones más intensas.

**Siga una rutina normal**
Mantenga un cronograma regular para asegurar y promover la salud física y mental. Foméntele mantenerse al día con sus tareas escolares y actividades extracurriculares, pero no los obligue si parecen agobiados. No permita que vean tanta televisión.
A CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL TO EVALUATE AND IMPLEMENT THE MENTAL HEALTH COMPONENT OF YOUR SCHOOL CRISIS AND EMERGENCY PLAN

The US Department of Education has published a model emergency-response and crisis-management plan for schools, which is now available at www.ed.gov/emergencyplan. Mental health issues are an important part of this plan. Based on lessons learned from schools directly affected by the tragedy and loss of September 11, 2001, the School Crisis and Intervention Unit of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network has developed this checklist for your use to assess the mental health component of your school’s Crisis and Emergency Preparedness Plan. We encourage you to use this checklist as a guide to determine how well your school is prepared to respond to the immediate and long-term psychological effects on students, their families, and staff after a crisis or disaster.

MITIGATION & PREVENTION
Identify and Assess the Risks

- Identify the most common kinds of crises and disasters that may impact your school
- Identify hazards or sites that may pose a threat to your school in the event of a disaster or terrorist act (e.g., factories, commercial transportation routes, conventional and nuclear power plants)

PREPARATION
Expect the Unexpected

- Develop a comprehensive crisis and emergency-response plan incorporating both immediate and long-term mental health responses to the negative consequences of potential hazards
- Establish relationships with local mental health professionals and agencies as well as the community-based organizations specializing in disaster and trauma
- Define the roles of your school staff, qualified community mental health providers, and other community partners for different types of crises and phases of response and recovery (e.g., disaster-relief organizations, faith-based organizations, victim-assistance/victim-advocacy organizations, emergency medical services, first responders, and public health)
- Conduct regular annual or bi-annual crisis team practice drills for crisis response during different times of the day (e.g., lunchtime, recess, different periods)
- Identify students and/or staff who may have special needs or may be psychologically vulnerable during crises (e.g., wheelchair bound, visually or hearing-impaired students or staff, students with pre-existing developmental, psychological, and emotional difficulties, students who have experienced other trauma or major loss)
- Develop crisis and emergency-response protocols, practices, and materials that are culturally and linguistically appropriate to reflect the diversity of your school family
- Create redundant or back-up systems for evacuation, family reunion, and communication with your staff and parents during the crisis and recovery periods
- Provide your new staff members and substitute staff with adequate background information and training regarding crisis response
- Review annually your school crisis and emergency-response plans, protocols, and practices with community partners, including your school’s response and lessons learned from past crises
- Conduct staff development on selected topics (e.g., impact of violence and traumatic events on children, adults, and the school climate; early warning signs and risk behaviors associated with traumatic stress; psychological first aid; evidence-based interventions; immediate and long-term recovery; suicide prevention and threat assessment; and vicarious trauma/effects of cumulative stress)
RESPONSE
Are You Ready?

- Assess the level of student and staff exposure to violence and identify those most at risk for emotional distress or problems requiring support and assistance
- Activate resources for the immediate, concrete needs of the students, families, and staff
- Identify the auditory, visual, and/or other sensory cues that serve as traumatic reminders of the event and monitor the range of trauma-related behaviors among students and staff
- Implement a program of support and provide psychological educational materials to students, staff and parents to help with reactivity to reminders
- Develop media messages during a crisis to disseminate trauma-related information and ways that parents can support the recovery of their children
- Provide regular information updates and maintain open communication with teachers, other staff, and parents. Work with teachers to provide developmentally appropriate information to students. Monitor rumors and maintain timely, accurate information
- Develop a system to identify and follow psychologically vulnerable students and staff during the recovery period

RECOVERY
Addressing Long-Term Needs

- Identify students and staff who may need long-term mental health support or intervention and develop the school and community resources to provide these services
- Monitor the effects of cumulative stress on caregivers such as office staff, teachers, aides, and crisis team members
- Provide information on how to cope with cumulative stress and modify work roles/responsibilities or add volunteer or support staff as needed
- Make educational materials available to parents and staff on topics such as common symptoms and constructive ways to cope with stress
- Develop short-term modifications of school curriculum as students and staff are recovering
- Establish working relationship with Employee Assistance Programs
- Consider offering school-based mental health services provided by community, university, or public/non-profit mental health agencies after large-scale events and identify funding to support those services (e.g., Project SERV)
- Follow up with student referrals made to community agencies
- Note secondary adversities, such as subsequent losses and traumas, (e.g., parental loss of employment, separation, divorce, death, suicide or suicide attempt, loss of residence)
- Plan a response for the anniversary period several months in advance, including a needs assessment to identify students at continued risk

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) and its nationwide network of partners is dedicated to raising the standard of care and improving access to services for traumatized children, their families, and communities throughout the United States. The NCTSN is supported by a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

www.NCTSNet.org
### Helping Youth after Community Trauma: Tips for Educators

Traumatic events such as a natural disaster; school violence; traumatic death of an educator or peer can impact students’ learning, behavior, and relationships. Here are some reactions you might see and how you can help. Keep in mind, not all students will feel the same way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENTS WANT YOU TO KNOW THEY MAY:</th>
<th>YOU CAN HELP WHEN YOU:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Feel sad, scared, empty, or numb. Younger students may be clingy. Older students may be embarrassed to show their distress, and may hide their feelings or share more on social media.</td>
<td>1. Provide support by listening to concerns and feelings. Educate students about different trauma reactions. Don’t assume all students feel the same or need help but try to accommodate students’ different responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Have behavior problems that are new or worse (e.g., have outbursts, be irritable, break rules). Some may engage in serious or harmful behaviors (e.g., drug or alcohol abuse, self-injury, or risky sexual behavior).</td>
<td>2. Have patience with minor behavior problems. Stay calm when setting limits. Return to predictable school routines and activities as soon as possible. Refer students for professional help for any concerns about self-injury or dangerous behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Have trouble concentrating, paying attention, participating, or getting work done on time.</td>
<td>3. Understand that attention and doing classroom activities may be affected. Focus on the present with gentle reminders about daily tasks. Consider modifying work or providing extra structure and instructions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Appear sleepy or irritable due to having sleep problems.</td>
<td>4. Realize that sleep difficulties are common and can lead to fatigue and poor participation. Suggest healthy sleep habits (e.g. a break from screens before bed) and calming coping strategies. Consider adjusting deadlines until sleep is stabilized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Have physical trauma reactions like stomach aches, headaches, a pounding heart, body aches, or fast, shallow breathing.</td>
<td>5. Recognize physical reactions may confuse or scare students, making them even more afraid. Encourage students to use relaxation strategies such as slow breathing, stretching, or physical activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Startle more easily in response to everyday noises (e.g. a pencil dropping, door slamming, the P.A. system crackling, kids yelling) and become scared.</td>
<td>6. Identify the sources of everyday noises and that these are not dangerous. Reassure students that they are safe. Explain that physical responses (e.g. feeling startled, tense muscles, fast breathing) are common after a trauma when they are on high alert. Suggest using calming strategies such as slow breathing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Think life is meaningless, or withdraw from family and friends. Even students who are typically outgoing may become withdrawn. They may retreat to social media, gaming or online activities.</td>
<td>7. Suggest engaging in positive activities (e.g., volunteering, hobbies). Discuss ways to cope with sad feelings and the value of in-person support, talking with family or friends, rather than connecting via media. Discuss ways to support students with other adults they trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Believe that school isn’t safe, that the trauma will recur, or have other negative trauma-related thoughts. Students who think their future will be cut short may react by not studying or skipping school.</td>
<td>8. Create a sense of safety by returning to normal, predictable routines as soon as possible. Remind them that such events are rare. Point out ways adults make school safe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Feel responsible for not taking action before, during or after the event to prevent or minimize the outcome. They may feel guilty for not being harmed.</td>
<td>9. Discuss that people did the best they could at the time. Give honest, accurate, and age-appropriate information. Let students know you will tell them the truth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Search the media for information about the event in an attempt to find answers.</td>
<td>10. Suggest they limit the use of media to maintain balance and perspective. Offer to help find answers to difficult questions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If any of these problems interfere with student functioning, find out how to refer them for specialized help. Educators and professionals should also be aware of their own reactions and seek support as needed.
Sample Letters to Parents/Community on School Shootings

Lexington (SC) School District One

As you can expect based on the events in Connecticut, we are getting emails and calls from nervous parents seeking reassurance that that their child’s school is safe.

Lexington County School District One is committed to the safety and well-being of all our students at all times.

Every school has a detailed school safety plan which parents and other interested individuals are welcome to review and offer suggestions for improvement. We continue to review these plans annually in an effort to eliminate any oversights and to provide continuity throughout our schools.

We work closely with the Lexington County Sheriff’s Department and its resident deputies, the Town of Lexington Police and the Pelion Police Department to address our school communities’ needs regarding the safety of our schools.

We have School Resource Officers at all our middle and high schools and at the Lexington Technology Center.

However, our schools are just like the rest of the world. From time to time, something out of the ordinary happens — a student brings a weapon or drugs to school or a student threatens himself or another individual.

For that reason, each school has a comprehensive visitor check-in and check-out system located at the front desk in all schools designed to help ensure that no unauthorized person enters. This system runs a background check on each visitor every time he or she visits. Each visitor must check in and out when in a school, regardless of the time of day.

All visitors and volunteers must wear their name badges in plain sight at all times while on school grounds or at school-related events or activities. (Visitors are not, however, asked to check in and out using this system during large evening PTA/PTO meetings, school plays, programs, athletic events, etc.)

Schools lock exterior doors that do not have to remain unlocked and limit the number of access points. We are also renovating all schools’ entrances and making the front entrance a secure entrance. When someone enters a school with a secure entrance, that person must go into an office and is unable to enter the school without going through an office.

We have telephones in every classroom, including portables.

We added security cameras that can link to law enforcement at several schools and plan to add more. These allow for remote access during an emergency.

We have after-school programs or safe havens at most of our elementary schools.
The district’s school counselors and school psychologists use a series of staff development initiatives designed to help staff identify students at risk for violent behavior early and to teach staff appropriate interventions. Each teacher has a written guide to help them recognize early warning signals and tell them the steps to take if they are concerned about a student. They are reminded to stay alert to internal problems, to recognize potential warning signs and to react quickly to a crisis.

Guidance counselors and school psychologists in each school teach teachers how to use this guide.

We remind parents and staff how important it is to maintain open communication with children — about what they are seeing on television, about how they deal with anger and frustration, and about their relationships with other students. If parents feel free to talk with administrators and staff about their children’s problems and budding disputes within the student body, it will go a long way toward defusing tensions within the school.

We remind students that they have an obligation to themselves and to their classmates to bring information about dangerous situations to adults at the school so that we can respond quickly and appropriately to protect their safety. (The safety and well-being of their friends and classmates are more important than the issue of tattling or “narcing.”)

We remind parents and students that they can help make our schools safer, too, by not passing along the rumors they hear to their neighbors or friends; but, instead, reporting them to a school administrator who will then investigate and turn it over to the police, if necessary.

To remind our staff, students and parents that they have several tip lines they can use to report crimes. The district’s Tip Line telephone number is 803-821-1232 and the Crime Stoppers of the Midlands telephone number is 1-888-274-6372.
Anoka-Hennepin Schools, Coon Rapids, MN

Dear Parents and Guardians,

By now you may be heard about the tragic school shooting that occurred today at an elementary school in Connecticut. No doubt there will be extensive coverage of this on the news and much discussion about it in our communities in the coming days.

I want to assure you that safety of our students is our top priority and that our school has a comprehensive crisis plan in place to help avoid tragedies such as this. The plan is reviewed and updated annually.

I also want to share with you some tips from the National Association of School Psychologists for helping your children cope with news such as this.

What Parents Can Do:

1. Focus on your children over the week following the tragedy. Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.
2. Make time to talk with your children. Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.
3. Stay close to your children. Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.
4. Limit your child’s television viewing of these events. If they must watch, watch with them for a brief time; then turn the set off. Don’t sit mesmerized re-watching the same events over and over again.
5. Maintain a “normal” routine. To the extent possible stick to your family’s normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., but don’t be inflexible. Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.
6. Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed. These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.
7. Safeguard your children’s physical health. Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise, and nutrition.
8. Consider praying or thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families. It may be a good time to take your children to your place of worship, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.
9. Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope. Most schools are likely to be open and often are a good place for children to regain a sense of
normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers can help. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children and adults who need it.

If you have concerns about your child’s reaction to this news, please contact ________ (add name(s) of the most appropriate persons in your school).

Sincerely,
School District of Clayton (Mo.)

Dear Clayton Parents Guardians and Community Members:

We were deeply saddened to hear the news of the school shooting today at a Connecticut elementary school. Our thoughts are with the members of that community. The safety of our students is always the top priority in our District. We take seriously our responsibility to ensure the safety of your child every day.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all of our families that we have a plan in place at each of our schools to handle emergency situations. We work with the Clayton police and fire departments to prepare for these types of emergencies and regularly practice our safety procedures with students and staff through discussions and emergency exercises. While no amount of planning can guarantee that a tragedy such as this will not occur, we are doing everything we know to keep students and staff safe while at school.

It is equally important for us to work with our staff and ensure they are prepared to support their students in difficult times. We took time this afternoon to update our staff on this tragic event and ensure that they have the resources they will need to respond to student questions next week. We will also have our counselors and administrators ready on Monday morning to respond to students as needed. As we learn more details about this tragic incident in the hours and days ahead, it will be important for you to spend time talking with your children and helping them cope with this news. I would like to share with you a list of tips from the National Association of School Psychologists about what parents can do at times like this:

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

2. **Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily.

3. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
   - **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them.
   - **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
   - **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school
safety guidelines communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

3. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.

4. **Observe children’s emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child’s level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

5. **Limit television viewing of these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.

7. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don’t push them if they seem overwhelmed.

As parents, we are troubled by events like what occurred in Connecticut. However, days like today also provide us with the opportunity to be leaders as we help our children to understand, also reminding them that, as the adults in their lives, we do everything we can to keep them safe. As we learn more details about today’s events, we will discuss and debrief with administrators and staff accordingly and be ready when your children return to school on Monday.

Sincerely,

Sharmon B. Wilkinson, Ed.D
Superintendent
Chandler (Ariz.) School District

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Our hearts and prayers are with the families of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Today’s senseless shooting spree that killed at least 27 people, including 20 children, is not only heartbreakingly tragic but unconscionable.

We want you to know that the safety of our students and staff is the No. 1 priority of the Chandler Unified School District. Our commitment has included security fencing, with one-point of entry, and a requirement that all visitors check-in with our offices. Additionally, we are in the process of installing surveillance cameras at our schools and support buildings.

In partnerships with the Town of Gilbert and City of Chandler, we employ uniformed School Resource Officers, while the district also employs school Safety Officers. We meet with law enforcement officials monthly to review safety practices and routinely revise our crisis intervention plans for each school. Additionally, our campuses routinely practice lockdown drills that are advised and evaluated and approved by our officers.

Most importantly, we are attempting to promote a culture where everyone has a responsibility to be vigilant and focused on safety. We ask that you talk with your children about the importance of sharing with information that could be considered threatening to our community with a responsible adult.

In closing, we pledge to make safety our No. 1 priority and to take any threat seriously. We are anxious to review lessons learned from today’s terrible tragedy so that we can continue to be proactive.

Please join me in prayer and positive thoughts to the entire community of Newtown, Connecticut.

Respectfully,
Camille Casteel, Ed. D
Superintendent
Dear Parents:

Teachers, school administrators and support staff play an important role in helping students recover from traumatic events like the Sandy Hook tragedy. Simply returning to school promotes the welfare of children and families. District administration has met over the weekend to respond to the many parent messages, evaluate school safety procedures, and prepare information for teachers and staff in anticipation of our students return to school today.

In traumatic events, proximity to the event is an important factor in predicting reactions from students and staff. In general, those closest to the trauma are the most likely to have experienced psychological harm. While this event was literally hundreds of miles away from our community, the media coverage brought it into our homes and lives. Additionally, as educators, we can relate to the horror of this event as we try to place ourselves in the shoes of the teachers and principal who so valiantly sacrificed their lives to save children.

Because it is difficult to predict how anyone will react to a traumatic event, the best we can do is to be supportive and responsive to our students and their varied responses. Some students will have no reaction; some will be upset or anxious to some degree. Some may not have even heard of the event and others will have been immersed in the coverage on TV. We are prepared for a wide range of possible situations.

In general, it is important to remember that the vast majority of students are generally resilient and should recover quickly from an event like this. However, those with previous history of trauma, such as loss of a family member to death, parental divorce, being a victim of a crime or serious injury, being in an accident, poverty or homelessness, or having a real or vicarious exposure to violence (video games?) are more vulnerable and may have a stronger reaction and a longer recovery period for this event.

For those students who are having significant reactions to this event, we will have mental health support available throughout the district from counselors, social workers and psychologists. Our school nurses will also be ready to assist as needed for health concerns that may arise.

We will look to learn what we can from this latest school tragedy and use that information over the coming weeks to determine what improvements we can make in security and response procedures.

Please continue to keep the community of Newtown, and the students, teachers, staff and parents of Sandy Hook Elementary School in your thoughts and prayers. Thank you.

Les Fujitake
Superintendent of Schools
Dear (insert school name) families,

We are deeply saddened by the tragic news from Connecticut. As educators and as parents, it is difficult to comprehend such catastrophic events. We feel closely connected to the children, teachers and staff, families and community who were so devastated by this loss of innocent lives.

I want to reassure you that we take school safety and security very seriously at _________ Elementary School and in Vancouver Public Schools. We are vigilant and proactive when it comes to our children's safety and have clear plans and procedures to deal with emergency situations. Further, in response to recent events across the country, the school district is increasing supervision and security at all sites. All elementary schools have at least two administrators on-site, and Metro Watch is providing additional security for elementary schools. These additional precautionary measures are in place until winter break.

We have convened as a staff to review other precautionary measures that will be implemented to maintain both a secure and nurturing environment for our students. We have discussed what to do and/or say if a student raises a concern or has questions about the tragedy. School support and administrative staff have committed to being available and accessible to respond to children's concerns and needs as necessary and appropriate.

I am sharing a link to an excellent document entitled, “A National Tragedy: Helping Children Cope.” This document, prepared by the National Association of School Psychologists, provides parents and school personnel with ideas and age appropriate responses to Friday's events.


Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Sorrow makes us all children again. Destroys all differences. The wisest know nothing.” I am sure that you, like me, are struggling to make sense of the tragedy in Newtown. We also are trying to find words to help our children feel safe and resilient in a world that sometimes feels unpredictable and scary. My only advice is to keep hugging your children, tell them you love them, and let them know that you and the important people in their lives are there to keep them safe.

As we enjoy this holiday season, I know that we will all have the families of Sandy Hook Elementary School in our thoughts. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or if I can provide any support.

Wishing you all a peaceful and restful winter break,

___________, Principal
Dear Peel District School Board Families,

We were all shocked and saddened by the tragic events that transpired at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on Friday. Our thoughts are with all those affected, and we acknowledge the bravery of staff, parents and community partners who reacted immediately to protect the children. Our flags will be lowered to half-mast, in an expression of support to the community of Newtown, until the end of the day on Dec. 21.

Although events like this are extremely rare, we recognize the impact they can have on each of us—our children, staff, families and friends. Individuals react to situations like this in various ways. We may feel sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety and anger. Whatever you feel is okay.

Our social work team has prepared some tips to help you support your children and family at this time:

- Recognize that children may become concerned that something bad will happen to themselves, family or friends. Explain that safety measures are in place and reassure them that you and other adults will take care of them.
- If your child is not focused on the tragedy, do not dwell on it. Try to avoid having detailed adult conversations regarding the tragedy in front of children. However, be available to answer questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behaviour or social interactions.
- Limit exposure to media coverage. Images of a disaster or crisis can become overwhelming, especially if watched repetitively. Young children in particular may not be able to distinguish between images on television and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news—be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective.
- Maintain normal family routines as much as possible. Routine family activities, classes and friends can help children feel more secure.
- Be aware of your own needs. Don’t ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief and anger. Talking to friends, family members, faith leaders and mental health counsellors can help. Let your children know you are sad. You will be better able to support them if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner.

As always, our top priority is the safety and well-being of each of our students—your children. This is a responsibility we take very seriously. It’s important for you to know help is available through our schools. If you are concerned about your teen or feel he or she needs additional support, and you would like to speak with a social worker or psychoeducational consultant, please contact your principal or vice-principal.

With the holiday season and winter break upon us, I hope you will have many opportunities to participate in and appreciate family life. There is no gift more precious than time spent with loved ones.

Sincerely,

Tony Pontes
Director of Education
School Safety and Crisis

School Violence Prevention: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams

School administrators and crisis team members can create safe, secure, and peaceful schools free from the destructive influence of violence in all of its forms. To do that, schools must implement purposeful, coordinated strategies to increase levels of safety and security and simultaneously promote student wellness and resilience. These efforts improve students’ readiness to learn and build positive school climates.

School violence is a broad term that includes overt aggressive behaviors such as physical fights on campus, bullying (including online bullying or cyber-bullying), physical assault, bombing, arson, or other deliberate means of causing harm to the staff and students. Sadly, it includes rare, tragic, devastating school shootings. In addition, school violence includes more covert behaviors that increase fear and diminish school safety such as threats of injury at school, weapons possession, and harassment. In some communities, gangs recruit school-age students to be members and contribute to violence in schools.

When violence occurs at school, trust is violated, which thereby diminishes schools’ efforts to attain their primary mission of educating all students and helping them to reach their full potential. While not all instances of violence can be prevented, policies and procedures that support a balanced cross-discipline approach to school safety and emphasize clear communication, foster positive personal connectedness, and implement evidence-based support will be most effective in preventing school violence.

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS

Efforts to reduce school violence are most successful when they use multiple strategies selected specifically for each school’s needs. No single strategy or program will create a safe school and effective efforts require collaboration among administrators, teachers, school psychologists, other school mental health professionals, school resource officers, parents, students, and community agencies.

Create school–community safety partnerships. First, it is critical to engage in a systematic planning process to understand the school’s safety challenges and opportunities. Establish a school leadership team that includes key personnel: principals, teachers, school-employed mental health professionals, instruction professionals, school resource officers, community members, and a professional skilled in data collection and analysis.

Conduct a needs assessment for planning and selecting programs and interventions. School safety measures should be geared to the specific needs and culture of the school community. A
needs assessment can identify strengths and risks, such as the types of violence that occur, the context in which they occur, the most frequent victims, and the effectiveness of discipline procedures and existing intervention efforts. The needs assessment should also look at staff members’ specific strengths and existing resources that may be deployed more effectively. The resulting data help guide decisions regarding program and strategy selection and professional development.

Establish comprehensive school crisis response plans. It is critical to have crisis plans for multiple crisis situations with clearly defined roles for each member of the multidisciplinary crisis team. Plans should also consider the importance of the mental health response to minimize the traumatic impact of such events. Therefore, crisis response plans should have explicit procedures for reaffirming physical health, ensuring perceptions of safety and security, reestablishing social support, evaluating psychological trauma risk, and providing the interventions appropriate for the level of risk.

Balance measures to ensure both physical and psychological safety. Intruder-based, armed violence is not only extremely rare but also extremely difficult to prevent. Solutions that may seem obvious and simple, such as metal detectors and armed security officers may not be the most effective means of prevention. Schools cannot be barricaded against all possible harm. Trying to do so is counterproductive to maintaining a healthy learning environment. Excessive building security does not promote a sense of safety or student well-being (and can undermine it), nor does it provide a guarantee of safety when an armed intruder is willing to die. Reasonable physical security—such as locked doors; lighted and monitored hallways; and visitor check-in, check-out systems—must be combined with violence prevention and positive behavior supports.

Enhance efforts to create and maintain a positive school climate that promotes learning, psychological health, and student success. School administrators must balance physical security with efforts that foster student resiliency, connectedness, and social competency. Central to this effort is helping students and their families feel valued and personally invested in keeping their schools safe. This relates to teaching codes of conduct, bullying prevention, conflict resolution, personal responsibility, respect, and compassion. Promoting trusting student-adult relationships is essential to students feeling safe and empowered to report potentially dangerous activity (including threats of violence and suicide). Such reporting is one of the most effective school safety strategies.

Respond systematically to all threats made by students. Schools can and must respond to all threats that students (and others) make on school campuses. Use a threat assessment approach for evaluating and intervening with students’ potential violent behavior. Although research shows that the vast majority of student threats of school violence do not result in actual violence, they nonetheless provide opportunities to better understand and respond to any special needs of the students making the threats and the students being threatened. Each threat needs to be reviewed and threat response efforts at school should be based on research-validated procedures. Collaboration and communication with other education, mental health, and law enforcement agencies is essential to an effective process, which should be incorporated into the school safety plan and training.

Promote antiviolence initiatives that include prevention programs for all students. General interventions include school-wide violence prevention programs. These activities encourage all students to experience positive emotional development and to use nonviolent means to resolve their
personal conflicts. Such programs are natural bridges between interventions that focus on individual change and those seeking to establish the positive climate and culture of the school.

**Provide adequate access to mental health services and supports.** Mental health, behavior, safety, and learning are integral to one another. Yet only a fraction of students in need actually receive mental health services, and among those who do, the majority access those services in school. In many schools, however, the availability of school-based mental health professionals remains inadequate. School administrators should consider how their school-based mental health personnel are engaged and then consider advocating for more staff members if necessary. School psychologists, counselors, and social workers can offer assessment and counseling to students and can consult with families and teachers to provide effective interventions and supports. They are trained to do so within multitiered systems of support, such as Response to Intervention, which promotes learning and sustainability of supports over time.

**Intervene with students who experience significant school behavioral adjustment problems.** Implement strategies that foster students’ social–emotional skills that are associated with adaptive coping and resilience. For students who are experiencing social and/or psychological distress, the complex problems they face require the coordination of interventions across school and community agencies. Schools alone cannot address the myriad needs of these students. For this small number of students, cooperative agreements may be needed with community mental health, juvenile probation, child welfare services, alcohol and drug treatment, and other youth and family-serving agencies.

**SUMMARY**

There is no single or simple solution to making schools safe. It is a multifaceted, ongoing effort that requires commitment and participation from all stakeholders. Any act of school violence is unacceptable; so is failing to act with clarity and diligence on the lessons learned from so many tragedies and honed by the work of educators across the country. The challenge for school leaders and mental health professionals is to work together to put that knowledge into practice. When an entire community commits to reducing violence, the health and well-being of its children and youth are enhanced.

**REFERENCES**


