



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Tips for School Administrators for Reinforcing School Safety

Violence such as the high profile school shootings in Colorado, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania can cause concern within school communities, even if they are not directly affected by the event(s). Adults and students struggle to understand why these events happen and, more importantly, how they can be prevented. School principals and superintendents can provide leadership in reassuring students, staff, and parents that schools are generally very safe places for children and youth and reiterating what safety measures and student supports are already in place in their school.

Suggested Steps to Reinforce School Safety

There are a number of steps that administrators can take to reinforce the fact that schools are safe environments and increase student/adult comfort level.

1. Write a letter to parents explaining the school safety policies and crisis prevention efforts and cite statistics that less than one percent of violent deaths are "school associated."
2. Be a visible, welcoming presence at school, greeting students and parents and visiting classrooms.
3. Issue a press release about the school district efforts to maintain safe and caring schools through clear behavioral expectations, positive behavior interventions and supports, and crisis planning and preparedness.
4. Conduct a formal review of all school safety policies and procedures to ensure that emerging school safety issues are adequately covered in current school crisis plans and emergency response procedures. (Such reviews should be conducted at least annually.)
5. Review communication systems within the school district and with community responders. This should also address how and where parents will be informed in the event of an emergency.
6. Connect with community partners (emergency responders, area hospitals, victim's assistance, etc.) to review emergency response plans and to discuss any short-term needs that may be obvious in response to the current crisis.
7. Provide crisis training and professional development for staff based upon needs assessment.
8. Highlight violence prevention programs and curriculum currently being taught in school. Emphasize the efforts of the school to teach students alternatives to violence including peaceful conflict resolution and positive interpersonal relationship skills. Cite specific examples such as Second Step Violence Prevention, bully proofing, or other positive interventions and behavioral supports.

School Violence Prevention Measures to Highlight

All schools work to prevent school violence and schools are very safe places. This can be a good time to remind students, staff, and parents of their important role in promoting school safety by following procedures and reporting unusual or concerning individuals or behavior. It also may be helpful to address the important balance between sufficient building security and providing students a healthy, nurturing, normal school environment. Administrators can reinforce the importance to school safety of creating a caring school community in which adults and students respect and trust each other and all students feel connected, understand expectations, and receive the behavioral and mental health support they need.

Below is a list of possible school prevention activities that principals may want to reference in letters home or statements to community members about school safety.

1. Limited access to school building (designated entrance with all other access points locked from the exterior).
2. Monitoring of the school parking lot (parking lot monitors who oversee, people entering and leaving the campus).
3. Monitoring and supervision of student common areas such as hallways, cafeterias, and playgrounds.
4. School-community partnerships to enhance safety measures for students beyond school property (Block Parents, police surveillance, Community Watch programs).
5. Presence of school resource officers, local police partnerships, or security guards.
6. Monitoring of school guests (report to main office, sign in, wear badges, report unfamiliar people to school office).
7. Crisis plans and preparedness training (building level teams; regular review of plans and simulation drills; training teachers and other staff in how to respond to students' questions, crisis awareness).
8. Creating a safe, supportive school climate that provides school-wide behavioral expectations, caring school climate prevention programs, positive interventions and supports, psychological and counseling services, and violence prevention programs (bully-proofing, social skill development, conflict mediation).
9. Encourage students to take responsibility for their part in maintaining safe school environments, including student participation in safety planning. They, better than adults, know the hidden or less trafficked areas of the school that are more likely to be dangerous.
10. Promote compliance with school rules, reporting potential problems to school officials, and resisting peer pressure to act irresponsibly.
11. Anonymous reporting systems (student hot lines, "suggestion" boxes, "tell an adult" campaigns).
12. Threat assessment and risk-assessment procedures and teams for conducting the assessments.
13. School preparedness drills (intruder alerts, weather and fire).
14. Citing school safety incident data. Recent trends have found that school violence nationwide is declining. Many school districts have local data that support this trend. When possible, citing local data helps families and students feel more at ease.
15. Presence of security systems (metal detectors, video monitoring, exit door alarm systems).

What to Say to Students

Information for students should be based entirely on their need, developmental age, and relationship/proximity to the event. The goal is to reassure students that although there is always a possibility of violence occurring in a school, the probability of a school experiencing a high profile violent act is extremely low. Following are some suggested general key points that can be adapted to your school(s). See developmental guidelines below.

General Points/Key Messages

- Schools are safe places. Our school staff works with your parents and public safety providers (local police and fire departments, emergency responders, hospitals, etc.) to keep you safe.
- Our building is safe because....
- We all play a role in the school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened.
- There is a difference between reporting, tattling or gossiping. You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the *possibility* of something happening and *probability* that it will affect you (our school community).
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying about the event.

- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
- Stay away from guns and other weapons. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.
- **For Parents:** Open communication between home and school is critical to the safety and well-being of our students and your children. Let us know if you have a concern or question about school policies or your child's safety. Know if your child's friends have access to guns. Keep any guns in your house locked up and away from children of all ages.

Helpful Guidelines to Keep in Mind

1. ***Any conversation with a student must be developmentally appropriate.***
Young children are not able to process the complexities of violence in the same way that adolescents and young adults are prepared to discuss the issue. Young children often gauge how threatening an event is by adult reactions (i.e., if caregivers act scared and frightened, young children will view the event as scary and frightening). They may be confused by what they hear and may have basic fear responses such as bad dreams, resistance to separate from their parent, and/or crying and clinginess. They respond well to basic assurances by adults and simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.

Older children and teenagers may have more information about an event as they are commonly able to access information independent of adults via the Internet and television. For these youth, it is important to discuss issues openly emphasizing the efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools. It is also important to emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.
2. ***Communicate to parents about the conversations that school personnel have had with students.*** Schools need to keep parents informed about how they are responding to student questions and any type of support that has been made available for students struggling with the crisis. Copies of announcements or formal statements should be available to parents. Additionally, if teachers working with older students choose to have classroom discussions about the event linked to their instructional activities, parents should be made aware of these activities and any suggestions for following up at home should be offered.
3. ***Provide parents (and teachers) with guidelines for talking with children about violence.*** Encourage parents to talk with their children and validate their feelings. They should children's questions guide what and how much information to provide, be open to opportunities to talk when children are ready, honest about their own feelings related to violence, and emphasize the positive things that child/family/school can do to stay safe. They should be aware of signs that their child might be in distress, e.g., changes in behavior, anxiety, sleep problems, acting out, problems at school or with academic work. Remind parents and teachers to be conscious of media exposure and what they say about the event. Limit television viewing, (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.

4. ***Reinforce student strengths and focus on normal routines and activities.*** Most high profile school tragedies will prompt schools to have some type of public response depending upon the developmental levels of the students, the school's history of related events, or the proximity of the crisis to a community. Only the local school administrators and community leaders who are aware of the school and student's history can judge the extent to which a response is warranted. Where schools do choose to alter their daily routines to address students concerns, large or small, it is important to know that one of the best ways for students to recover from the effects of a tragedy is to maintain or return to their normal school routines. Normal routines help establish a sense of calm and predictability important to maintaining effective learning environments. Schools should recognize that depending on the impact of the event on individuals, not all students will quickly be able to make these transitions back to the normal routine and that counseling and psychological services should be available for those continuing to require some support and guidance
5. ***Consider the cultures, traditions, religions and family/community values of students in any school response.*** It is important that schools respect the values, traditions, beliefs and customs of the students and their families impacted by the crisis. If outside crisis responders are called in it is important that they learn about cultural issues, usually through partnerships and consultation with community members who can share fundamental guidelines for appropriate interactions. Remember not everyone processes strong emotions through conversation. Some children and adults may need to respond through art, poetry, prayer, or activity.

NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.