

HOT SHEET

Schoolyard Tragedies: Coping with the Aftermath

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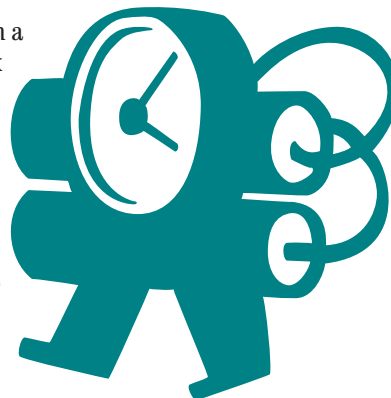
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CHILDREN INVENT THEIR OWN WAYS OF DEALING with catastrophe — whether it be widespread starvation and disease, the horrors of war or, as seen recently here in the United States, the terror of schoolyard shootings. For example, making up games based on tragedy allows children to ventilate their feelings and cope with what has happened to them and their friends — a natural reaction that may be expected after a crisis.

While still too unusual to be considered a trend, the 1997-98 school year saw an alarming number of schoolyard shootings, many perpetrated by children under 15 years of age. According to the National School Safety Center, 40 students, teachers and other school personnel were killed during the 1997-98 school year, most of them as a result of shootings. Besides the high number, what was unusual about these shooting is that they resulted in multiple deaths and occurred in rural areas, where many would not expect such a level of violence. The risk of death at school is still extremely small, with chances at about one in 1 million school days. Still, the violence that occurred during the 1997-98 school year has resulted in action plans designed to help victims and to prevent more school violence.

One of the keys to recovering from a schoolyard tragedy is getting back into the routine. This implies that the community is under control again, that the sound of the school bells and the fire drill will again be heard, that the fifth graders will welcome their entrance into the sixth grade. But there are many issues that must be addressed before a community can resume its daily routines.



Immediately after a crisis, emergency response teams often use Group Crisis Intervention, a series of debriefing protocols developed by the National Office of Victims Assistance. These techniques can assist survivors as they regain a sense of control over their lives and begin the process of reconstructing new lives. Safety and security of the victims is the first concern to be addressed. Victims and survivors must also be allowed to tell their own stories and be assured that their emotional actions are valid. Finally, the survivors will want to know what happens next — from the practical issues of funerals and the criminal justice system, to the upcoming events that could trigger emotional reactions well into the future.

Emotional care and concern for the victims should continue. The National Association of School Psychologists suggests that schools and the community provide the following support to victims of tragedies after emergency response teams leave:

- Let students know there will continue to be people who are willing to listen. Tell them who is available and when and where to find these people.
- Discuss feelings with the class or individual students who feel most affected.
- Discuss the disaster in the context of other subjects, e.g., discuss suicide prevention in a junior high health class, discuss weather-related disasters in an elementary social studies class.
- Provide facts to help allay fears. For example, if a classmate dies of cancer, facts about prevalence and cures may help students who are fearful when they feel unwell.

- Think ahead to effects which might be delayed. Be aware that similar incidents in another location may trigger renewed feelings. Plan a special remembrance for the one-year anniversary of the disaster, thereby diverting renewed reaction if the anniversary date is ignored.
- Prepare for long-term reactions which are normal, such as the continued need to discuss a hurricane or shooting.
- Watch for pathological long-term reactions. Pathological long-term reactions are more severe than those experienced by most children and might include persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event through intense recollections, dreams, flashbacks or hallucinations; persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma or numbing of responsiveness; diminished interest in usual activities; or signs of increased arousal, such as sleep difficulties, irritability, hypervigilance, disturbances in concentration, exaggerated startle response.
- Find ways to emphasize a return to stability: When the disaster abates, return to previous schedules and maintain these for a time, even if some change in routine was planned, in order to provide a sense of security and comfort.

In the aftermath of schoolyard tragedies, communities are often left wondering about the “what if” questions: What if the student or perpetrator had received the attention he or she needed? What could we have done to prevent this tragedy? As a reaction to the 1997-98 school year shootings, President Clinton directed the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice to develop *Early warning, timely response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. The document was delivered to every principal’s desk at the beginning of the 1998-99 school year and is available at several web sites.* The guide gives school communities reliable and practical information about what they can do to be prepared and to reduce the likelihood of violence. The hope is that school principals, whether working in small, rural towns or the inner-city, will see the need for violence prevention programs as successful methods to reduce campus confrontations.

It also includes a warning about jumping to conclusions about students who may fit a specific profile or set of early warning indicators. The document calls for school officials to use the following principles to ensure that distress signs are not misinterpreted:

- Do no harm. Get help for the child by referring him or her to qualified professionals who can evaluate and make recommendations on how to deal with the troubled child.

- Understand violence and aggression within a context. Violent and aggressive behavior as an expression of emotion may have many antecedent factors and certain environments can set it off.
- Avoid stereotypes. Race, socioeconomic status, cognitive or academic ability or physical appearance are false cues of how a child may act.
- View warning signs within a development context. Know what is developmentally typical behavior so that those behaviors are not misinterpreted.
- Understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs. Thus, is it important not to overreact to single signs, words or actions.

And what are those early warning signs, or signs of possible personal distress? And do they always work when predicting behavior that leads to violence? The authors of *Early warning, timely response...* make it clear that it is not always possible to predict behavior that will lead to violence. And, they say, none of these signs alone is sufficient for predicting aggression and violence. The early warning signs are offered only as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help and include:

- Social withdrawal and excessive feeling of isolation.
- Excessive feeling of rejection.
- Being a victim of violence.
- Feelings of being picked on and persecuted.
- Low school interest and poor academic performance.
- Expression of violence in writings and drawings.
- Uncontrolled anger.
- History of discipline problems.
- Past history of violent and aggressive behavior.
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes.
- Drug and alcohol use.
- Affiliation with gangs.
- Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.
- Serious threats of violence.

Many school districts throughout the nation are training their teachers how to recognize and respond to early warning signs. Teachers and school personnel are also receiving instructions on how to react during a school crisis. School psychologists can plan and lead these training sessions, as well as be instrumental in developing crisis response plans. For more information, contact your school psychologist or the California Association of School Psychologists at 916/444-1595.

* Web sites from which the *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safe schools* can be downloaded include www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywarn.html or www.naspsweb.org/center.html, as well as at the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research.