Stop school violence through caring and connections
By Dan Ceaser

In the wake of last week's tragedy in Parkland, we all find ourselves hugging our kids a little tighter and asking ourselves, "Is my child safe at school?" It's a reasonable question, one that's difficult NOT to ask in the sad days following violent, terrifying incidents.

As a Head of School and a parent of three school-aged children, I am concerned about the safety of my own kids and all schoolchildren in these uncertain times. Americans are arguing about possible solutions – tougher gun regulations? tighter security? armed teachers and/or guards on school grounds? – but agreement is difficult to achieve.

Readers Digest published a thought-provoking article, "One Teacher's Brilliant Strategy to Stop Future School Shootings—And It's Not About Guns," about a teacher's efforts to ensure her students aren't lonely or bullied. The author has a son whose teacher has, every Friday since the Columbine school shooting in 1999, asked her students to write on a piece of paper the names of four children with whom they'd like to sit the following week. She then studies those papers, looking for patterns, to see who is being left out, who is being bullied, who might be popular one week but seemingly forgotten the next.

This teacher understands well that "all violence begins with disconnection. All outward violence begins as inner loneliness." By finding patterns of loneliness, she has been able to help the kids in need.

Data clearly shows that loneliness – which has been identified as a major public health problem – impairs physical and emotional health. Even when it doesn't result in violence, loneliness can have long-term negative consequences for children who feel isolated or are bullied.

In schools across the country, in an effort to increase prosocial behaviors and reduce depression and stress, educators are focusing our efforts in the area of social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL helps children to understand and manage emotions, building a foundation for goal-setting and achievement, healthy relationships, and decision-making. As communities become more diverse and complex, an increasing number of schools are turning to SEL to lay the groundwork for safe and effective learning, and positive interpersonal relationships.

SEL skills are essential – they help students succeed in school, career and life. In addition to improving academic results, SEL reinforces crucial skills such as decision-making, self-awareness and self-regulation, and encourages students to try harder while helping them to handle failure better. When children feel respected and loved in the classroom, they will be much more willing to take risks and try difficult tasks, and – this gets to the heart of the matter at hand – they will feel empathy and look out for their fellow classmates.

It has never been more important to intentionally teach kindness and compassion in real-life interactions. We often hear from kids that they are more comfortable engaging peers on a screen than face to face. We also know from research that students today are struggling with stress and isolation at unprecedented levels. The SEL curriculum supports students finding themselves, and maintaining positive connections within their school community. It has been shown to increase feelings of safety, decrease instances of bullying, and contribute to positive student achievement.

By caring and connecting with others – especially those who seem to be lost and alone – we create a better community. A safer community. And that's something I believe we can all agree is a good thing.

Dan Ceaser is the head of school at the Hershorin Schiff Community Day School.