

# Sample Letters to Parents in Aftermath of Previous School Shootings

## from Bloomington (MN) Public Schools

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.

**from Vancouver Public Schools**

**Elementary school version**

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, 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.

[http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/terror\\_general.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/terror_general.aspx)

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

**from Peel District School Board, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada**

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,