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School Violence Prevention: Tips for Parents & Educators

All schools work to prevent school violence and schools are very safe places. Children, staff, and parents all have an important role in promoting school safety by following procedures and reporting concerns. It is also important to balance sufficient building security with a healthy, nurturing, school environment. The goal is to reassure students that although there is a possibility of violence occurring in a school, the probability of a school experiencing a high-profile violent act is extremely low.

What to Say to Children

Talk with children and validate their feelings. Let their questions guide what and how much information to provide and emphasize the positive things that children/families/schools can do to stay safe. It is important to be patient as children do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work or visiting your classroom during passing periods or after school. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.

Be aware of signs the child might be in distress (e.g., changes in behavior, anxiety, sleep problems, acting out, problems at school or with academic work). Also be conscious of media exposure and what you say about the event in front of the student. Also limit television viewing (be aware if the television is on in common areas) as this can expose students to frightening images which only increase anxiety.

Following are some suggested general key points when talking to children:

- Schools are safe places. Our school staff works with local police and fire departments, emergency responders, and hospitals to keep you safe.
- Our school 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 and tattling, or gossiping. You can provide important information, either directly or anonymously, that may prevent harm 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 or our school.
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Providing children with opportunities to do things they enjoy, sticking to a normal routine, and being with friends and family can help students feel better and keep them from worrying about the event.
- Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence. Thus, it is important that children be kept away from guns and other weapons. It is equally important that children be encouraged to tell an adult if they know someone has a gun.

- Students can be part of a positive solution to school violence by participating in antiviolence 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.

Helpful Guidelines to Keep in Mind

Keep explanations developmentally appropriate.

- **Early elementary school** students need brief, simple information that is balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety that remind children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills being practiced so they are prepared if somethings happens.
- **Upper elementary and early middle school** students 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 and provide concrete examples.
- **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 (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.

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, your child's safety, or the safety of their friends. Know if your child's friends have access to guns and keep any guns in your house locked up and away from children of all ages. Focus on building resiliency and coping skills to manage disappointments and help your child be comfortable seeking help from an adult they trust.

References:

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