

SCHOOL VIOLENCE

A guide for discussion with children

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On April 20, Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, was the scene of a true horror story, ending with fifteen dead at the hands of two students. This latest incident brings the death toll to 29 students and teachers in eight school shootings since 1997. This page abstracts information from *USA Today* and other news sources that may support parents and teachers as they help their children cope with feelings of insecurity, fear, and stress that are natural reactions to the events in the news.

Children need to feel safe in school and with their classmates. The events of this past week will naturally raise questions in their minds about what it means in their own environment. The single most important thing that adults can do to reassure their children is to talk to them.

Protecting your Kids

Parents must be aware of and involved in the media and activities influencing their children. President Clinton is quoted as observing that violent images "warp young perceptions" this past Wednesday. Katherine Montgomery, the Center for Media Education, said, "We, as a society, have to ask 'What is the impact of a steady diet of violent media content on a growing child?'" Based on his academic research, Brandon Centerwall concludes "we should be as careful about controlling our children's TV viewing as we are about their seatbelts, bicycle helmets, vaccines and nutrition."

CNN Headline News aired an excellent segment last Tuesday on the impact of television and movie violence on our social atmosphere. Despite consistent scientific evidence proving that TV violence breeds real-life violence, nothing has happened. 20 years of monitoring TV violence has shown no downward movement. Solid evidence was presented on CNN that TV accounts for at least half the homicide rate in society around the world. "It is a problem whose only obvious solution, censorship, seems unthinkable. Denial is easier."

Violence in TV, movies, rap and heavy metal music, and computer games may well have more influence on your child than you imagine. Nikki Sixx, guitarist for Motley Crue, thinks parents need to take more responsibility for their children's values, and says he often talks with his young sons about what they are seeing and thinking.

The following article contains suggestions on how adults can help children deal with issues of violence. It is reprinted in its entirety from USA Today.

Answering kids' questions

USA Today, Thursday, April 22, 1999

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What is the age-appropriate way to talk to your kids about the frightening events in Littleton, Colo.? Experts' advice for:

* **Kindergarten.** These children have three important questions, says Harvard child psychiatrist Lawrence Kutner. They want to know whether they are safe, whether the adults in charge of them are safe, and how this will affect their daily lives. Satisfy them on all three points, Kutner says. Make sure you answer them, and give them the information -- even if they don't ask specifically.

* **Elementary school.** These children will be more willing to ask questions, Kutner says. They will wonder whether this could happen in their school. They may have very active fantasies, such as bringing a bazooka to school to protect themselves, but that is a way of exploring how safe they feel there.

Talk about the difference between fantasy and reality and about safety measures at school.

* **Middle school.** Tell them that you want to make the world secure for them but that they must help, psychologist Robert Butterworth says. "They must tell you if they know kids who are very angry, maybe violent, because adults can't always identify them. Break the conspiracy of silence. 'You are not ratting on someone if you tell me.' "

* **Beginning high school.** There may be a bravado, a sense they are very cool and know everything, but they are really desperate for information, Kutner says. Let

them hang out in the kitchen while you talk to a friend on the phone about it. That gives them a face-saving reason to question you.

If you don't know specific information, acknowledge it, then suggest that you find out about it together, Kutner says. That is the kind of behavior that parents want to model.

How to talk to your kids

Teens, parents, and experts agree that talking—and listening—to children is the best way to cope with news events. 17-year-old Mike Baab says “Use this as a catalyst to find out again what is going on in your kids’ lives. It is really important to talk about an incident like this, and your kids *will* be talking about it.”

Parents should not expect too much from any single talk about difficult issues. Think in terms of “quantity time, not *just* quality time. You have to be with them during normal activities, hear the side comments they make,” says psychologist Dennis O’Grady.

Don’t push a teen to talk, even about this disaster. “Be chatty, folksy, and not intrusive...Come to issues indirectly, don’t push for emotions, and you are seen as open, a person who is safe to talk to,” says John Friel, author of *The Seven Worst Things Parents Do*.

How a Child Can Help

Realistically, it *can* happen here. Help your child be aware of the need to keep alert for potential problems in school and report them to teachers, parents, or other adults.

A helpful piece of guidance to help children know when to get help and yet avoid being a “tattle-tale”: If you think someone could get hurt, that’s the time to tell an adult.

It is important not to overreact and think any child who dresses or behaves differently is potentially dangerous. Appearance is not a good indicator; rather, you need to look at their writings, unusual fascinations, and behavior with other students.

The best guidance is simply to encourage your child to come to a parent if any other child or situation at school makes him uneasy. If your child is not sure what to do,

encourage her to come to you with the concern. Together you can decide whether to refer the concern to the school principle (generally the best place to start).

Scriptural Helps

Some Bible passages to read with your child:

- ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21)

(This verse was used by the minister at the memorial service of one of the children killed in Littleton as the most important thing for the community to remember and practice in the days ahead.)

- ³You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. (Isaiah 26:3)
 - ⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5)
 - ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)
 - ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)
 - ³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)
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Danger Signs

Parents should intervene if their children show warning signs such as:

- Lack of remorse
 - Sudden secrecy
 - Cruelty to animals
 - Need to win
 - Defiant and combative
 - Change in friends
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Should your family or class choose to send cards of encouragement to the students, families, or teachers of Littleton, the following address can be used:

Messages for Columbine
Communications Services
Jefferson County Public Schools
P.O. Box 4001
Golden, CO 80401-0001.