

# School Safety

Help **STOP** The Violence!



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## School Safety

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*The role of the family in violence prevention and response is perhaps more important than the role of the school. However, without the school's involvement, success may be limited.*

# The family's role in violence prevention and response

The home and the school, long the oases for security, safety and social support, have in recent years become more stressful than nurturing for many children. Both may have become more like "armed camps" than places to thrive. This is one picture that emerges as members of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing School Violence Advisory Panel review the data from their visits to schools and communities throughout California during the past 18 months.

Schools are being equipped with metal detectors and staffed with increasing numbers of security guards, symbols of an insecure and unsafe social order. At the same time, an increasing number of children are being exposed to guns in homes, a factor which has resulted in an increased number of weapons-related accidents and confiscations of these weapons at school. In some communities, children are being exposed to gunshots ringing out around their homes and in the streets, alleys and parks.

This alarming portrait of children growing up in America is made worse by a persistently stressful economic picture reflecting high levels of unemployment. Growing numbers of children and fami-

lies are becoming homeless or live in crowded shelters, often sharing space with other families.

In California, more than half a million children between five and 14 years of age are latchkey children. They lack supervision, guidance and nurture as they grow up in often stressful environments. Furthermore, increasing incidents of child abuse and neglect, spousal abuse and other forms of domestic violence have been documented nationwide.

An example of the risks facing young people includes homicide as the second leading cause of death among adolescents and the No. 1 cause of death among young black males. The result is that young people are experiencing increasing amounts of stress and trauma because of violence. Most importantly, they lack sources of security, stability, personal resilience and empowerment.

## Family safety: school-community link

The respective roles that the family, the school and the community play in crisis prevention and response must be complementary and synergistic. One institution is interdependent with another. Child safety should be acknowledged as the responsibility of the family, the school and the community. This also implies that parents and schools reach an understanding about respective responsibilities.

Here are some of the major areas to consider in violence preparedness for

schools and families:

- *Do not reinvent the wheel.* Use existing processes in place at the school and with local law enforcement agencies. These include the school's disaster preparedness plan, the school safety plan and the Neighborhood Watch.

While considering violence prevention and crisis response readiness, define "community" as the school attendance area. Arrange a community meeting to discuss expanding the school's safety plan to include any type of violence. Include in the discussion the roles of various community members.

- *Develop a list of volunteer parents.* With the help of school and law enforcement officials, identify volunteers who can respond in the event of violence and care for children whose parents are away working during the day. Perform background checks to screen these volunteers. Practice emergency responses during the year. Update leader identification and commitment regularly.

- *Promote collaboration.* In spite of the odds against children and families, it is important for parents and school personnel to realize that much can and is being done in some communities to prevent children from becoming victims of physical or psychological violence. A promising trend is school and family collaborative partnerships, which are springing up in many parts of the country. Indeed, there is a growing recognition that col-

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improve the quality of life for children.

In California, one example of collaboration partnerships is the formation of the systemwide Center for Collaboration for Children established at each of the 20 campuses of the California State Universities. Additionally, the Los Angeles County Office of Education has developed a comprehensive plan for inter-agency collaboration. These efforts promise increased coordination of services, including an emphasis on primary prevention and early intervention and the support of families and schools as sources of help, growth and resilience.

- *Understand basic human needs.* Violence-free communities and crisis resistant families are goals that can be achieved by addressing some basic, common sense principles. Using Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of values, it is important to understand the value of creating environments which meet minimum needs for physical safety, food and shelter, and psychologically consistent reassurance, guidance and nurture.

One essential condition is the creation of a true sense of community around the local school. In fact, creating violence-free school communities that nurture children is the major objective of California Senate Bill 2460. It is also the principal goal of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing School Violence Panel.

- *Appreciate cultural diversity.* Another strategy for violence-free schools and communities is to help children and their families acknowledge and value the cultural diversity within their own communities. This includes the recognition that whatever happens inside families reverberates in local schools and communities.

- *Recognize different experiences of oppression and victimization.* Events such as the Los Angeles riots and ongoing international violence cause varying states of tension in many communities. Often residents are immigrants from troubled lands. Many are refugees and have experienced high levels of stress. These factors together create the ingredients for

highly sensitive interactions among people.

The stresses and strains of an urban and often violent society have a greater impact on some families than on others. With the speed of telephones and mass media, children of immigrant families may hear about violence in their homelands and re-experience fear. Schools should be sympathetic toward children who may be survivors of war and other violence.

### **Developing a violence prevention plan**

As one recalls the frightening images televised during the Los Angeles riots as well as the violence seen daily on television, it becomes very clear that preparation and prevention must go hand in hand. We want to make this a better world by eliminating racism, classism, discrimination and hate, and it is important that children and their families be provided with safe environments.

The strategic concepts that follow are designed to address long-term and immediate needs for child and family safety. Three important principles guide family safety efforts:

- *All families need preparation.* Parents should *not* assume that children do not need support in feeling safe, secure and prepared to handle psychological stress. All children are exposed to violence; all face differing degrees of risk, including riots, gang violence or ethnic hate.
- *Teach appropriate language.* During the Los Angeles riots, inappropriate use of language by the media and public figures inflamed emotions, instilled fear and hate, and subjected children to stereotypes and biases. Teach children appropriate language for expressing feelings, fears and concerns.
- *Understand the difference between and importance of physical and psychological levels of preparation.* Parents should understand the significance of physical preparation, such as secured doors and windows or sufficient food and water stored in preparation for earthquakes or other natural disasters. However, it is equally important for parents

to understand the psychological needs of the family. For example, children can interpret violence inflicted on others as violence inflicted upon themselves.

Children's cognitive development in primary grades is concrete, egocentric and therefore extremely vulnerable to psychological trauma.

When children are exposed to violence, parents should listen to them and encourage them to verbalize what they are feeling. In answering children's questions, parents should also provide clear, consistent information that is appropriate for their age level. Parents may need professional assistance from the school.

### **Assessing physical safety**

Physical safety implies both bodily security and the personal feeling of psychological safety and wellness. Parents and schools can assess the physical safety of both the home and the school campus by asking the following questions:

- *Are the house and campus physically secure?* Check to make sure the physical environment is secure. During visits to schools, CTC panelists often saw and heard about conditions which posed safety risks for children and adolescents. These included unused facilities that remain accessible such as janitorial closets, auditoriums and stages.

In the home, do children understand the importance of keeping doors locked, not only because of potential danger, but also to prevent risks?

- *Do children have a way to gain access to the house?* Have children been taught to handle keys responsibly? It is a good idea to identify a trusted neighbor who can be given an emergency key. This can be done through the Neighborhood Watch meetings where families identify neighbors who may be an appropriate match for their family.

- *Is there an adult who is able and willing to supervise children?* It is important for parents to make arrangements with nearby families, school officials, churches or other organizations that will be available to account for children in

the event that parents are separated from their children. Disturbances in the community may prevent families from reuniting. Parents should talk with their children about an emergency caretaker and where and how other adults will care for them in an emergency. This should be discussed with the volunteer adult present, then discussed in the privacy of the family on a regular basis.

Civil and criminal disturbance may occur during school hours. Therefore, parents should discuss with their children procedures for supervision, release to designated adults and parent notification.

- *Have you taught your children how to handle emergencies at home?* It is important for parents to reassure children of their physical safety. Parents need to explain the ways to reach outside help, including police, fire department and paramedics, and how to provide information over the telephone about their home's location and description.

- *Have you discussed gun safety and/or personal defense with your children?*

More family members are killed or injured by firearms than by any other preventable cause. Parents need to understand that children are curious and may inappropriately use a weapon in a perceived threat to physical safety. Parents should talk to children about appropriate means of self-defense, taking into consideration a child's limited ability to take matters into their own hands. Adults also need to deal with their own personal fears and needs for security before discussing self-defense with children.

- *Have you developed community watch programs or security patrols?* Parents should formulate security plans with responsible adults in the neighborhood and with the help of local law enforcement, businesses, schools and other community-based organizations. Remember that these individuals are members of the same community and have a vested interest in security and safety. Define procedures and roles for supervising your neighborhood in the event of an emergency. Make these plans available to your local police dispatcher. This is com-

munity policing at its best.

### **Food and shelter: basic needs**

The same procedures that apply in preparation for natural emergencies, such as storms and earthquakes, should prevail in any kind of civil disturbance or violent act.

Remember, it is important to have sufficient nonperishable food and water to last your family at least one week. Discuss the reasons for these supplies with children, and assure them that they are physically safe from the events that they may have witnessed or seen on television. Discuss the alternate shelter and the authorization of designated adults to supervise them and make decisions on their behalf. The key is to provide information and objectives that are clearly explained and openly discussed.

### **Providing reassurance**

Probably the most important prevention strategy for families is open and frequent communication with children. The following list of strategies may help enhance a feeling of safety, while at the same time develop a practical, sensible plan for securing and maintaining physical and psychological security within the family.

- *Teach personal and social responsibility.* Children should be given the opportunity to explore social issues and their understanding of those issues. If children have been exposed to violence, it is important to provide them with access to professionals who can help them deal with their painful recollections. Parents need to understand post-traumatic stress and its symptoms, along with ways to seek help.

- *Discuss the relationship between physical safety and emotional safety.*

Parents need help in understanding the different ways in which children of different ages interpret events and conditions around their homes. This is especially important with infants, preschoolers and adolescents. School psychologists and counselors should help parents understand the psychological mile-

stones in development and how these stages make children very vulnerable to trauma. Unfortunately, much domestic violence remains unreported simply because no *physical* marks are seen even though children may be experiencing emotional trauma.

- *Teach all members of the family how to respond to a crisis.* Despite precautions and planning, sometimes the unthinkable may happen. Handling emergencies effectively requires planning, training and practice. The most important thing is to develop a written crisis plan for the family, which includes what to do in case of fires, intruders, earthquakes and other violent events.

- *Discuss what to do and what not to do in a crisis.* Each family member is different and has a range of experiences in understanding and dealing with violence and crises. Help members understand what they should and should not do. This includes tips on how to:

- avoid panic or overreaction;
- describe factual conditions;
- calm younger children;
- attend to priorities; and
- obtain help.

### **Understanding post-traumatic stress**

Realize that the aftermath of a crisis requires a response. Post-traumatic stress can be just as debilitating as the actual crisis and may require medical or psychological treatment.

According to Robert S. Pynoos and Kathi Nader, directors of UCLA's Prevention/Intervention Program in Trauma, Violence and Sudden Bereavement in Childhood, acute post-traumatic stress symptoms result from violent life threats, and the severity is related to the extent of exposure to the threat or witnessing injury or death.

This witnessing can occur vicariously and through television viewing. Young children re-enact the experiences in their dreams, fantasies and play behavior and may actually experience symptoms of physical pain and injury when exposed to trauma and violence. Children can act out through depressed moods, crying and

withdrawing. They can also act out with fits of temper, anger outbursts and open hostility.

Parents and school personnel who see signs of post-traumatic stress as a result of acts of violence and unexpected trauma should consult a psychologist or other mental health professional. The following simple tips may be helpful:

- Listen actively to children's feelings, stories and complaints.
- Be alert for signs of post-traumatic stress, including nightmares, crying, overt fear, loss of appetite, bed-wetting and other signs of regression.
- Consult a counselor or psychologist about additional concerns and ways to get help for children. Professionals are often available free of charge to schools and families.
- If someone known to the child dies or is injured, be aware of the need to grieve and the need for supportive counseling.
- Be aware of children's worries about the reoccurrence of traumatic events and fear about conditions worsening. Children are particularly insecure regarding potential threats to the safety of parents, siblings and pets.
- Be aware of media depiction of violence. Sometimes unsuspecting parents find themselves viewing a violently graphic scene with their children. When watching a film with overt violence or trauma, talk with children about what they saw. Without suggesting an interpretation, ask about how they experienced what they saw. Clarify misinformation and provide age-appropriate facts. Be alert for children's afterthoughts and changes in behavior and mood.
- Children may become preoccupied with death and may need to talk about it. Listen to them and help them explore their feelings.
- Be aware of stress, teen suicide and suicide clusters. High stress conditions in the lives of adolescents may result in suicide attempts and suicide clusters. These symptoms require immediate intervention by trained counselors

or psychologists. Make these support services available to the entire family of suicide and attempted suicide victims.

### **Working together**

Violence of all forms is becoming a constant source of stress for children and their families. As society becomes more complex and as world events impact our diverse communities, it is important to help families develop violence prevention plans as part of school and home partnerships. These plans should be proactive and help families develop healthy lifestyles and support systems that produce resilient children.

These partnerships should result in concrete plans of action that are preventive and educational in nature. They should include specific strategies for addressing all forms of violence, including street violence, riots, gang violence, racially motivated hate crime and the standard disasters for which schools and civil and governmental organizations must be ready.

Crisis prevention should not be an ordeal, but rather a part of normal learning about our families and our communities. What is most helpful to children is that the school and the family offer consistent and clear messages with regard to conflict, violence and appropriate ways to respond. All children need adults around them that are nurturing, secure in themselves and knowledgeable about the world and ways to handle unexpected events.

The role of the family in violence prevention and response is perhaps more important than the role of the school. However, without the school's involvement, success may be limited.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, prevention is generally less expensive and more effective than crisis intervention and remediation. We must realize that the ever visible signs of violence affecting children are the concerns of all. These signs are not parents' problems, children's problems or schools' problems: They are everyone's problems.

## **Family crisis prevention: A recap**

The following principles may help schools and parents capture the essence of family crisis prevention and response:

- Build emotional resilience in your family by emphasizing and enhancing its strengths.
- Create a family, school and community environment rich in protective factors, including caring, setting clear expectations, and providing consistency and nurture.
- Each of the three primary family environments — the school, home and immediate neighborhood — must be defined, and adults within each of these environments must share responsibility for the protection and nurture of children. Secondary environments include the church or place of worship, workplace, and parks or recreational facilities.
- Supportive relationships are a must; they should be available to children in their neighborhood, their home and at school.
- Create an emotional protective shield through caring, responsible adults who have well-defined roles they take seriously.
- Develop a Neighborhood Watch for the purpose of sharing responsibility for nurturing, guiding and protecting children during any traumatic event.
- Talk with children, listen to them, especially in times of stress. Reassure them that you are okay and they are okay.
- Keep informed and inform your children.
- Take time to review your family values and beliefs with children.
- Discuss with your family ways to resolve conflict responsibly.
- Learn how to seek help when you need support and assistance.