

# Talking to Your Children About School Violence

**School shootings are horrible and scary for children and adults alike. Intense media coverage of these incidents exposes many of us to chilling details.**

Preschool children have a limited ability to understand whether events on the news are real or fantasy. Nevertheless the visual images can be extremely intimidating, and preschoolers should be viewing these scenes on a very limited basis and under a parent's supervision.

Psychologists feel that children between the ages of six and ten are most vulnerable to what they see on television. They know the difference between fantasy and reality but can't yet process the information in a mature manner.

Parents need to reassure children and remind them that school violence is unusual and is featured in news reports because it is such an atypical occurrence. If the news reports seem disturbing to their children, they should turn off the news. Even adolescents should not be constantly exposed to the disturbing media images and reports. Make sure your children understand that just because they see a news report about school violence, it does not mean they are likely to become a victim.

**To guide parents through discussions about school violence, the National Mental Health Association offers the following suggestions:**

**Encourage children to talk about their concerns and to express their feelings.** Some children may be hesitant to initiate such conversation, so you may want to prompt them by asking if they feel safe at school. When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term "violence" but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them.

**Talk honestly about your own feelings regarding school violence.** It is important for children to recognize they are not dealing with their fears alone.

**Validate the child's feelings.** Do not minimize a child's concerns. Let them know that serious school violence is not common, which is why these incidents attract so much media attention. Stress that schools are safe places. In fact, recent studies have shown that schools are more secure now than ever before.

**Empower children to take action regarding school safety.** Encourage them to report specific incidents (such as bullying, threats or talk of suicide) and to develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Encourage older children to actively participate in student-run anti-violence programs.

**Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your child's school.** Explain why visitors sign in at the principal's office or certain doors remain locked during the school day. Help your child understand that such precautions are in place to ensure his or her safety and stress the importance of adhering to school rules and policies.

**Create safety plans with your child.** Help identify which adults (a friendly secretary, trusted teacher or approachable administrator) your child can talk to if they feel threatened at school. Also ensure that your child knows how to reach you (or another family member or friend) in case of crisis during the school day. Remind your child that they can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.

**Recognize behavior that may indicate your child is concerned about returning to school.** Younger children may react to school violence by not wanting to attend school or participate in school-based activities. Teens and adolescents may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.

**Keep the dialogue going** and make school safety a common topic in family discussions rather than just a response to an immediate crisis. Open dialogue will encourage children to share their concerns.

If school-aged children ask, "Can this happen in my school?" parents need to be honest but point out that it is unlikely to happen in their community.

Regardless of your children's ages, reassuring them of school safety and security is of utmost importance.

Review how the schools and community are working together to keep the students safe. Role-play scenarios that concern your children. Encouraging them to create various responses will reassure them that they would be able to act appropriately in an emergency.

Some children may be reluctant to discuss school violence, yet show troubling signs of distress. If your children exhibit excessive worry, clinginess, increased arguing, excessive irritability, nightmares, headaches, stomachaches, trouble eating or sleeping, or refusal to go to school, try initiating conversations about the school violence to encourage your children to express their feelings more easily. If the behaviors continue, talk directly with a school counselor and/or call Carebridge for professional guidance from a behavioral health professional.