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School Violence and the News

As terrible and frightening as incidents of school violence are, they are rare. Although it may not seem that way, the rate of crime involving physical harm has been declining at U.S. schools since the early 1990s.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), fewer than 1% of all homicides among school-age children happen on school grounds or on the way to and from school. The vast majority of students will never experience violence at school or in college.

Still, it's natural for kids and teens — no matter where they go to school — to worry about whether this type of incident may someday affect them. How can you help them deal with these fears? Talking with kids about these tragedies, and what they watch or hear about them, can put frightening information into context.

Talking to Your Kids

It's important for kids to feel like they can share their feelings, and know that their fears and anxieties are understandable.

Rather than waiting for your child to approach you, consider starting the conversation. Ask kids what they understand about these incidents and how they feel about them.

Share your own feelings too — during a tragedy, kids may look to adults for their reactions. It helps kids to know that they are not alone in their anxieties. Knowing that their parents have similar feelings will help kids legitimize their own.

At the same time, kids often need parents to help them feel safe. It may help to discuss in concrete terms what you have done and what the school is doing to help protect its students.

What Schools Are Doing

Many schools are taking extra precautions to keep students safe. Some have focused on keeping weapons out by conducting random locker and bag checks, limiting entry and exit points at the school, and keeping the entryways under teacher supervision. Other schools use metal detectors.

Lessons on conflict resolution have been added to many schools' courses to help prevent troubled students from resorting to violence. Peer counseling and active peer programs help students become more aware of the signs that a fellow student may be becoming more troubled or violent.

Another thing that helps make schools safer is greater awareness of problems like bullying and discrimination. Many schools now have programs to fight these problems, and teachers and administrators know more about protecting students from violence.

How Kids Perceive the News

Of course, you are not your child's only source of information about school shootings or other tragic events that receive media attention. Kids are likely to repeatedly encounter news stories or graphic images on television, radio, or the Internet, and such reports can teach them to view the world as a confusing, threatening, or unfriendly place.

Unlike movies or entertainment programs, news is real. But depending on a child's age or maturity level, he or she may not yet understand the distinctions between fact and fantasy. By the time kids reach 7 or 8, however, what they watch on TV can seem all too real.

For some youngsters, the vividness of a sensational news story can be internalized and transformed into something that might happen to them. A child watching a news story about a school shooting might worry, "Could I be next? Could that happen to me?" TV has the effect of shrinking the world and bringing it into our living rooms.

By concentrating on violent stories, TV news can also promote a "mean-world" syndrome that can give kids a misrepresentation of what the world and society are actually like.

Discussing the News

To calm fears about the news, parents should be prepared to deliver what psychologists call "calm, unequivocal, but limited information." This means delivering the truth, but in a way that fits the emotional level of your child. The key is to be truthful, but not go into more detail than your child is interested in or can handle.

Although it's true that some things can't be controlled, parents should still give kids the space to share their fears. Encourage them to talk openly about what scares them.

Older kids are less likely to accept an explanation at face value. Their budding skepticism about the news and how it's produced and sold might mask anxieties they have about the stories covered. If an older child is bothered about a story, help him or her cope with these fears. An adult's willingness to listen will send a powerful message.

Tips for Parents

Keeping an eye on what TV news kids watch can go a long way toward monitoring the content of what they hear and see about events like school shootings.

Here are some additional tips:

- Recognize that news doesn't have to be driven by disturbing pictures. Public television programs, newspapers, or newsmagazines specifically designed for kids can be less sensational — and less upsetting — ways for them to get information.
- Discuss current events with your kids on a regular basis. It's important to help them think through stories they hear about. Ask questions: What do you think about these events? How do you think these things happen? Such questions can encourage conversation about non-news topics as well.
- Put news stories in proper context. Showing that certain events are isolated or explaining how one event relates to another helps kids make better sense of what they hear.
- Watch the news with your kids to filter stories together.
- Anticipate when guidance will be necessary and avoid shows that aren't appropriate for your child's age or level of development.
- If you're uncomfortable with the content of the news or it's inappropriate for your child's age, turn it off.

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