

Fears About School Violence

The return to school is a time filled with both excitement and reluctance for most children. There may be an unusual kind of anxiety added to the mixture: memories and fears of schoolyard shootings. Virtually every child in the country has heard--or seen--stories about students like themselves being gunned down by classmates.

How do children experience the media's coverage of these events?

How children respond to memories--or news stories--of schoolyard murders will depend on their age, temperament, and experience. Some children may be openly frightened. Some may fear that it could happen to them. Some may feel distanced from the possibility of violence in their own lives. Some may be unable to grasp that this really happened to real people. Some may take a protective stance of cynicism and apathy. However children respond, all of them need help and guidance from the adults who care for them.

How can parents help with children's fears?

Helping children feel safe about returning to school means talking with them and *listening* to them. Ask how they're feeling about school starting. Ask what they're excited about. Ask if they have any particular worries. Listen carefully for clues about their feelings.

Encourage them to tell you about anything that worries them. "Boy, the kid in that television program was really mad...do any kids you know get that angry? What would you do if you heard a kid talking about doing something violent? Or if you knew that someone in your class brought a gun to school?"

Assure them that you will be working to make their school safe.

You can Make Schools Safer

What can parents do to help ensure school safety?

Support and become involved in violence prevention programs. There are many effective programs available, but they don't work if they're not used. Find out what your school district offers. Or whether a local youth group is interested. Or your religious community. Then offer your time.

Keep guns out of the home. If this is not possible, keep them secure from children. The easiest place for children to get hold of weapons is in their own homes or those of family members. This was the case in all of the reported schoolyard killings.

Take the threat of children who threaten violence seriously. Again, all of the boys in recent school shootings had made verbal threats prior to acting on them. Clearly, an aggressive battle with action figures does not automatically signal horror in the making. But a kid who talks about wanting to "blow someone away" should never be dismissed. Urge school districts to increase counseling for depressed and angry students. One of the ironies of these terrible events has been the willingness of schools to mobilize counseling after the fact to help students deal with their experiences. A preventative mobilization of these resources could be much more effective, and would perhaps have averted the loss of young lives. School budgets are always under great pressure, but our children's safety is not a "frill."

The students whose schoolyards exploded with gunfire are not the only ones who were affected. When children return to school we need to help them come to terms with their fears and do our best to prevent future violence.