

In Response to the Shooting in Florida

Although school shootings are becoming commonplace enough that many don't make the news, some still rise to the surface in terms of media coverage. Those that involve a high number of fatalities still draw news coverage, making them the story of the day. When that happens, we can know that youth are also very aware of the event.

With social media being a part of youth's lives from such an early age, we need to make extraordinary attempts to reach youth when these major events occur. Digital natives – youth for whom social media has always been a part of their lives – are apt to look to their peers for support in the aftermath of troubling events, and all of that happens out of our view. Unless adults in kids' lives bring something up in conversation, youth often assume that they "should" be able to cope with it on their own. That means youth have only the level of wisdom of their peers to help see them through these difficult times. Better – much better – that they have conversations with adults who can both bring a sense of context and provide a sense of safety.

It is worth taking a moment to think about the importance of starting the conversation in a way that will invite youth into the conversation and avoid making them defensive. One way of doing that is making the youth the "the expert." So instead of asking mentioning the shooting and asking whether your child/student is anxious, consider framing it something like, "There was a lot of coverage on the news about the shooting in Florida yesterday. When that happens, how do you think that affects [your peers] [students] [kids your age]?" And then just listen. We often jump in too quickly to reassure youth, when what they really want and need is for us to listen to all of their concerns. When we move too quickly to reassurance, we stop the conversation at that point. It is far more effective to ask them to tell us more and to keep them going deeper. Then, still, instead of offering reassurances, engage youth in conveying their thoughts about a range of ideas or possible solutions:

- What might help students feel safer in school? (Or, "... be safer in school?")
- What could parents do to help youth feel safe? What could teachers do?
- What kinds of things has your school done that address school safety?
- What do kids wish adults understood about what it is like to be a teen today?

Questions such as those allow adults to learn a lot about what will help youth feel safe. When we make assumptions, we lose that opportunity. What we really need to know is what will help youth feel safe, and that is what they identify rather than what we adults might think.

Helpful concepts to be reinforcing might include:

- Although we hear about times when terrible things happen, we never hear news that tells us that "today 50 million students went to school and everybody came home safely."
- News coverage of one event reaches all of us in all regions of the country, and it makes it seem like this is what is happening in many schools. It is difficult to have a realistic sense of how rare these events are.

- If we were to take a gallon jar and fill it with sand to give an illustration of how few students actually die in a school shooting, we would need 2,500,000 (2.5 million) grains of sand and just one grain of pepper (or something of another color) to represent how rare this is. If you have one grain of pepper in a whole gallon jar of sand, it is nearly impossible to find.

It might be helpful to remember that the likelihood of a child dying in a school shooting is 1/2.5 million, and the likelihood that a child will die of a gunshot wound outside of school (in their own home or the home of a neighbor, for instance) is 1/1,600. But the news doesn't report on those individual deaths, even though they are so much more common. It is helpful for us to keep our own sense of context in all of this as well. Recognizing this helps us keep our own perspective and perhaps helps us take a deep breath and listen to youth rather than interrupting conversation with our own solutions or ideas. The greatest outcome of these conversations is when we leave youth knowing that we are willing for them to talk with us about anything. An expression in the crisis response community is, "never waste a crisis," and this is your opportunity as well – don't waste this opportunity to connect deeply with your children, setting the stage for more open communication about all kinds of things in the future.

Youth are very able to read our nonverbal messages, our body language and our tendency to steer conversations away from those topics that are uncomfortable for us. When something is so out-of-the-ordinary, we don't really know what will be helpful, and because we don't want to make it worse, we often avoid talking about it. Or we make general statements we hope will reduce fears, which then shuts off our listening to their need. This often leaves youth making up stories to fill in the blanks of their understanding and of their fears.

Some additional questions might include:

- How will I know if you are bothered by this later?
- What are some things that might be helpful for us to talk about in the next few days?
- Sometimes kids have trouble sleeping when they're anxious. How can I be sure that, if you want to sleep closer to us, you'll let us know? (It is fine for youth to bring sleeping bags into their parents room so they don't feel anxious when they're trying to sleep. If this persists for more than a week or so, it might be a good idea to get in touch with the school counselor and ask for ideas or coping strategies.)

As adults we often forget that, "I don't know, but let's continue talking about this," is a perfectly acceptable answer. We're used to having the answers, but when times are troubling, we're often even more motivated to have answers than we are patient to listen! Your kids need to know that you're willing to listen much more than they need for you to have a pat answer.

Finally, when wrapping up conversations of this sort, you might bring it into the moment:

- What do you need me to know right now?
- Will you come get me if you have trouble sleeping tonight?
- Is there something I could do that would be helpful right now?

Remember, your child/student doesn't need you to have all the answers, often the most important thing is for us to just listen! Keep a hopeful tone, focusing on solutions.