

REFLECTIONS ON SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Last week once again required reacting to another mass school shooting. In response to the events in Uvalde, Texas I met with the staff at both schools and reviewed our procedures, in particular the A.L.I.C.E. protocol emphasizing the “A” which stands for “Alert”. I stressed that the best way to keep children safe in general is to be alert to dangers, strangers, and risky situations. What we did not do was to discuss the shooting with students. This decision was driven by the fact that students are dealing with an elevated level of anxiety already due to a myriad of factors including COVID, climate change, impact of technology in their lives, etc. and that individual families have their own approaches to such events.

In the aftermath of this latest shooting, I read two excellent articles in the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times* about how to talk with children about mass shootings, parts of which I have excerpted for this newsletter.

Unfortunately, these types of conversations have become all too common place. Experts agree on some universal best practices like avoiding graphic details which would include limiting exposure to images on the news and social media. They also suggest that you engage in actively listening rather than trying to take away a child’s pain or anxiety.

The specifics of what is discussed and how parents respond to questions and concerns depends on a child’s age and development. Clearly a 5-year-old will have a very different understanding of an act of mass violence than will a 15-year-old.

With our Stony Brook students, the biggest question is whether to talk about the tragedy at all. Much of the answer comes down to whether you think they are likely to learn about it elsewhere be it a classmate, older sibling, or the news. Personal parental values also come into play.

“Some parents believe that even young children should know what is happening in the world – which has merit,” Steven Meyers, a professor of psychology at Roosevelt University in Illinois, said. “Other parents will want to shield their children as long as they can. There is merit to that approach as well.”

Important Dates



**Last Day
Of School
June 30th**

**Early Release
June 30th**

NYA begins at 11 AM following early dismissal. If your child is attending NYA on an early release day, please be sure to send a lunch or request the bag lunch offered by the schools prior to dismissal time.



If you decide to talk about the shooting with your Stony Brook student, your primary goals should be twofold: Offer very simple information and give ample reassurance that close adults are there for support and protection.

Dr. David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, suggests parents say something like: I want to let you know that in a school that is hours away from us, there was a person who hurt some children and adults, and a lot of people are sad. Noting where the school is can help provide some basic context about how the shooting affects them.

Blend reassurance with honesty from a young age. It's hard to reassure your child that he or she will be safe when, truthfully, we can't promise that. But we can be honest and concrete about current events. Neena McConnico of Boston Medical Center's Child Witness to Violence Project says, "If your child is old enough to be in a formalized school setting, they have likely heard something – and they are keenly aware of their parents' or caregivers' increased worry and anxiety". McConnico states that "there's a misconception that kids, due to their young age, are shielded." They are not.

Help children name their emotions. A younger student might say something like, "I feel bad." Help children unpack that feeling. Does "bad" mean sad? Angry? Frightened. Learning how to label bad feelings is a bedrock emotional skill that develops with age and practice.

For our older Eddy students, start by asking, what, if anything, they know about the event. "You're listening to how much they know," Dr. Harold Koplewicz, president of the Child Mind Institute, said. "And then you're telling them the facts of the case in a very calm, informational way. You are not sharing unnecessary details."

Make sure to ask what questions they have, if any. If they have none, that is OK. In fact, Dr. Scholfield said, "the most common reaction is no reaction." Simply reassure your child that you are available if and when there are questions down the road.

But if children have questions, be careful not to provide too much detail. Give small pieces of information and if you don't know the answer, simply say that. In terms of development, elementary-school age children and young adolescents tend to be focused inwardly, so they may immediately jump to how the news applies to them. Be reassuring. Talk about the safety measures that the school and NYA take to ensure student safety. Also, reiterate that while horrific, these events are still relatively rare. Some may debate this last point but think about how many students go to and from school safely each day.

McConnico urges parents to put things in perspective by turning the focus from the unpredictability of violence to the predictable ways that adults try to keep people safe, with an emphasis on the "trying" part. In our rush to make our kids feel better we might steamroll their feelings with reassurance. Instead, hear out their specific fears, validate them, and then model your own response. Name your feelings – "I am sad, angry, confused." Model expressing and coping with difficult feelings. There is a sense that we have to be stoic as parents/caregivers in difficult times. There is a balance.

Every expert interviewed for the *Times* and *Globe* stories emphasized that it is important for parents to tap into what they know about their own children: How do they typically process difficult emotions? How much access do they have to screens and social media? What is your sense of their baseline emotional well-being?

Children with underlying anxiety or a history of trauma may have more difficulty coping. Look for signs like sleep problems, changes in behavior (such as withdrawing, becoming clingy, or regression – bedwetting, thumb sucking) or physical complaints (change in eating patterns, nightmares). Some kids might process fears by engaging in violent play or drawing graphic pictures. To some degree, this is a normal way to make sense of the outside world.

Steer your child into positive behaviors. If he or she draws a scary picture, ask, “What could we draw that would make this picture feel safer?”

Dr. Schonfeld also noted that children are sometimes ready to talk about a seemingly unrelated loss after an event like a mass shooting, such as the death of a loved one.

There are many resources available to parents and families. Here are links to some:

<https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/online-resources/>
<https://childmind.org/education/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-school-shootings/>
<https://childmind.org/symptomchecker/>

Finally, make sure you are giving yourself time and space to process your own emotions being careful not to let your anxiety to become your child’s anxiety.

STAFF DEPARTURES

It is hard to shift from a weighty topic such as school shootings. That said, I did not want to lose the opportunity to acknowledge the departure of some staff members since teachers on the floor are the backbone of our program.

Meg Thackeray joined NYA four years ago after she and I met at a senior job fair in Orleans. Meg had retired after 30+ years as an educational assistant at the Nauset Middle School and missed working with kids. Meg was an expert at developing crafts for Stony Brook students. Meg always made the students feel safe, secure, and special. She and her husband are relocating to Florida.

Maura Lyons has worked at NYA for five years. She joined us after retiring as a science teacher in independent elementary and middle schools. Prior to the pandemic Maura split her time between Stony Brook and Eddy where she introduced STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) concepts and activities to students. The past two years Maura has worked with our Eddy students. Maura has also been a driving force behind the two NYA gardens helping write the grants that secured funding for both. She has shared her encyclopedic knowledge of plants with students teaching them about sustainability, compatibility, soil amendment, etc. Maura will be sharing her love of horticulture with others working at Agway in Chatham.

Bev Florance started at NYA six springs ago. A retired art teacher, she missed the connection she had with students. Bev started as a group leader before becoming site coordinator first at Stony Brook then at Eddy School. She was also the first staff member I met after taking the reins. Throughout her six years Bev was able to identify opportunities for improvement along with remedies. Bev is also the MacGyver of the staff able to make an art or craft project out of a paper clip, tin foil, and a cotton ball. For the past three years

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Bev also offered five-week art classes to students teaching them pastel drawings, acrylic painting, and more. With travel opening back up, Bev is planning trips to see siblings and her son in California.

I thank Meg, Maura, and Bev for their years of service to NYA and most importantly for their focus and love of our students. Please join me in wishing them well on the next chapters of their journeys.