

**Talking to Your Students Following
The Sandy Hook School Shooting**
Guidelines for administrators, counselors and teachers

SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT THIS OR NOT? AND IF SO, HOW?

There are lots of considerations when we're trying to decide what to say to our students at times like this. We're often not sure whether bringing something up makes it worse, or whether we should bring something up if we don't have an answer or a solution. Concerns might include:

- Will parents be upset that we talked about it with their students?
- Should we bring it up or will it bring up more fears for them?
- If we were close to the event, will we be able to maintain our composure?
- And lots of other possibilities.

Students will do as well as the adults around them. Often younger students perceive danger more based on the how stable adults were than on the actual level of threat. That means that, if people who are leading the conversations with youth are some combination of stable, compassionate, caring, listening people, it will help.

Who among us doesn't want to protect the innocence of our young ones? It is worth great consideration as we begin to decide whether to bring it up, and if so, how. Here are guidelines for responding to students:

- Always tell the truth. How much you say and how much detail you give is open to judgment, but don't tell lies. Better to say, "I'm not sure what to say to that..." or "Let me think on that a little," than to be dishonest.
- Respect the integrity of the question and the integrity of the student.
- Choose developmentally appropriate language and detail (less detail the younger the student).
- Answer what was asked, being careful not to read your own fears into their question.
- Keep gory details and drama out of your conversations.
- End conversations on a note of hope.

If we don't bring it up, we don't know what our students do or don't know. They ride the bus together, they walk to school, they're on the playground together and see one another at outside events. Even if their parents haven't told them about this event, there is always the possibility – or the likelihood - that other students have. When the students are only talking about it amongst themselves, we have no opportunity to help them process the event. Kids make up stories to fill in the blanks, and with events such as these, those can become huge stories.

Especially when something is out-of-the-ordinary, our students are often very "loyal" to our unspoken messages. So if we don't bring it up, they have to make up reasons why that might be. Some may think that our not bringing it up means we don't think it is important. Some may have parents or others in their lives that never talk about difficult issues, so they've grown to expect that, when times are tough, they're on their own. Yet other students may assume we're not bringing it up because we are too overwhelmed to provide them support, so we're hoping they'll stay quiet. Kids are kids... they make up stories to fill in the blanks.

Finally, if we want students to tell us what they know – later, when the stakes are really high – we have to lay the groundwork in our school culture **now** that promotes a sense on both sides that we'll always tell one another the truth and we'll always tell one another important things.

ADMINISTRATORS:

Perhaps the most important part is being sure that you give teachers lots of support and give them all you can so they're prepared. The best way to do this is to have a staff meeting before school when you do **two** things. One is that you give them all of the information and guidelines you can. The other is that you ask them to brainstorm.

- What they most dread about the day
- The question they most dread having to answer

If they can identify those two things, you have a much better chance at providing the kind of support staff members need. Too, giving them time to talk lets off some of the anxiety.

In the staff meeting at the beginning of the day on Monday, ask staff to help you identify those who might need extra support. For instance, if you had tragic deaths a couple of years ago and the class of the students who died has graduated, younger siblings who still attend your school may have a difficult time. Do you have teachers who have lost students to gun-related incidents? Are there families that have lost family members to homicide? There could be many ways that people in your school have been touched by a tragic event, and these public events can be triggers.

Send information home to parents about how to support their children. It is fine to remind them of the policies and procedures you have in place and invite them to be in touch with any questions or concerns they have. Feel free to give parents our website link for free resources: www.cmionline.com/free-resources/

This is a great time for lots of visibility. Lots of teachers and administrators greeting students as they come in to school in the morning... extra presence in the cafeteria and out on the playground... extra adults wandering through gathering areas for middle and high schools.

When difficult things happen, err on the side of offering a parent evening meeting rather than debating whether people will come. Even if you have a very small showing, you've sent a big message about supporting parents. Print the warning signs for youth or other parent handouts from our web site to distribute.

Communicating to Parents:

- Encourage parents to shield youth from television coverage ~ it is too graphic, and they have no way of putting this into context. Encourage parents rather to spend time with their kids without electronics. Quite time. Reading stories. Playing board games.
- Provide parents with guidelines for their discussions at home. Such guidelines are available at the CMI website www.cmionline.org. Look for the red banner across the top of the web site for resources specific to his tragedy. Parents could be provided either with a hard copy you have printed for them or through the link you might provide via email. There is also a "free resources" link on the home page.
- Give them information about what you're doing for school safety
- Invite them to do a little extra volunteering in classrooms so kids see more parent faces at school
- Reinforce with them that it is OK for us to tell our kids that bad things happen, and that the antidote to hopelessness for our youth is seeing us as available, solid, dependable, and hopeful.

TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS:

Opening the conversation in the classroom

First – our demeanor. Students have great radar for perceiving our fears, and they’re depending on us to make the world safe for them. Be as calm as you can be. Sound as self-assured as possible. Don’t let your own fears heighten theirs, although this doesn’t mean you should be dishonest with them. If they ask, you can admit that you, too, have fears sometimes, but then continue to talk about how you have learned to cope or learned to trust, or talk about how many helpers there are in our world. It’s fine if tears come to your eyes; you’re modeling that we all grieve and have sadness. It is just important for students to be able to perceive that you are still able to be in control. That they can count on you. In whatever ways you can, reassure them that you are very “there for them” and keep reinforcing that the way we get through these things is “together.”

When we don’t know where to begin, a gentle, but reassuring place is to **state the obvious**. When we do that, it sort of collects us all together in a place of agreement. It means we’re paying attention and speaking the truth. Some options, depending on age of student and proximity to the event, might include some variation of:

- We had really sad news last week in Connecticut. Do you know what that was?
- There has been a lot on TV about the sad news about the shooting at the elementary school in Connecticut.
- You may have overheard your parents talking about the shooting at the elementary school.

Then a **statement of assumption** such as:

- When things like that happen, we (or “kids” or “students”) have a wide range of reactions (or feelings). Some might feel scared, some might be angry at the person who did this, and some of us might not feel very much at all. (This normalizes their feelings or reactions to an unusual event.)

The statement of assumption is one that is worded such that we aren’t saying, “Do you have a reaction” but rather “people have a range of reactions” so we’re assuming that the student is likely having some kind of thought or reaction to this as well. If we ask the “yes or no” question – “Are you feeling sad?” or “are you bothered?” – it is often easy for a student to deny it. So the assumption is that there will be a range of reactions. This often makes it easier for a student to have the courage to speak of them.

Letting Them Talk. It is when youth begin to reveal their emotions or reactions that adults often unintentionally cut them off or redirect the conversation. This is when you have to work hard not to meet your own needs. Often, if students say they’re scared, we rush to reassure them that the person who did this is dead. But what we really need to do is to give them the opportunity to go deeper. “Tell me more about that,” is a great way to make room for more exploration. Resist the temptation to give your student your own reassurances YET! There will be time for that.

Other questions that might help them go deeper could be:

- What do you think worries other kids?
- Are there times you’ve been worried about something like this before?
- What are others saying about it?
- Are there other feelings you have besides [whatever feelings they labeled]?

Helping Them Feel Safe. If students voice fear or anxiety, this is the time to address it, resisting our own answers and seeking theirs.

- What could help you feel safer right now?
- What will help you feel safer coming to school?
- What could we do right now that would make a difference for you?

Recognize that when we **help them devise their own solutions**, those solutions are more apt to work for them. When we try to give our solutions, we may be way off base. We may think that having more police presence at school will be reassuring when, what they want is for more parents to be in the classrooms for awhile. Ask them!

Then if you have additional ideas that might help them feel safe, you might float them gently, but if we're off base, we may give them new concerns. ("Gee... do YOU think we need police at school?")

If students ask whether this could happen at their school, it is helpful to be able to have a visual means of giving them a sense of the extremely low probability that is. Using a gallon jar and pouring it full of sand of one color, and then just having one grain of another color to represent how seldom this happens. The actual statistics are that approximately 11 youth die in school violence in an average year. We lose 11 kids a DAY in the US to gun violence. We need to remember that they're still much safer **in** school than **out** of school.

Helping Them Make Meaning. If youth don't mention having fears, you might move on to: "What does it mean that this happened?"

This might be the most important question we will ask. Who we become as adults is so heavily influenced by **the meaning** we give life events. As a culture, we're not apt to ask that question, yet it is the cornerstone of how students make sense of life events, and it determines how they place themselves within the world. It is important to remember that the meaning we give an event is transitory and changes over time, so don't be overly concerned, but certainly address any concerns.

Helping Them Look Forward. It is helpful for youth to keep in mind things they are happy to **anticipate in the future**. That can be, "What do you look forward to this next week?" or over a much longer time frame.

Always end on **hopeful terms**. We have to hold hope for youth even when they have none. "Even though times like this are really difficult, I also see how wonderful it is that people all come together to help one another." "Just talking together once in awhile will help us feel better."

So the general process:

- Statement of observation
- Statement of assumption
- Taking them deeper into their feelings/reactions
- Help them come up with their own answers for what will help
- Ask what it means that this happened.
- Process their "meanings" statements with them
- Look to the future. "What do you look forward to this next week... next year...?"
- End on a statement of hope.

In the Days Ahead

Watch for signs of change indicating that students may be struggling:

- Appear over-tired, fatigued
- Withdrawn, sullen, sad or out of character
- Loss of interest in usual school activities or usual friends
- Any new behaviors such as cutting or other self-abusive actions
- Language that indicates hopelessness

Give students opportunities to process this event as a part of school work:

- Journaling with or without prompts
- Art activities
- A collective mural of hope (could be on butcher paper just done as a brief project)
- Writing reflective papers, not perhaps specific to the shooting, but with prompts about issues such as trust, issues about inspirational people in students' lives, improving school climate...

One really practical way for students to begin to feel a sense of control is always to do something. This would be an opportunity for your students to do fundraising to send to the Sandy Hook fund or some other cause of their choice, or to tackle a problem that your school has. Figure out a project with a positive focus/outcome.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

If your school has been the site of student deaths or other kinds of traumatic incidents, it is very likely that some of your students and/or staff will have a re-emergence of anxiety or other trauma-related symptoms to your event in addition to what the reaction would have been to the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. Things you can do:

Change the conversation with students to perhaps start with a different statement of the obvious: When tragic events like this shooting at Sandy Hook happen, for us, it often brings up our memories of our own tragedy (and name that tragedy). You can follow the same general process, but you might add, "In these past couple of days, what kinds of memories have any of you had of our own event?"

Expect that some students will really want to be close to you, which is just fine. Lavish **honest** reassurances.

Avoid false reassurance or promises we can't keep. Do talk about all steps you know the school and others are taking to help keep youth safe, but don't make promises you can't keep. Acknowledge to youth that bad things happen, but that they are rare, and that there are so very many people working hard to keep us safe.

Remember, it is OK for them to see some emotion.

The younger they are, the more likely their reactions will be delayed.

Try to keep routine and structure in your/their lives. Let students know if there are going to be changes in their schedules.

They can only do as well as you do, so take the best care of yourself you can....exercise, good nutrition, lots of rest.

This is a time when students can more deeply appreciate your statements that every one of them matters. The teachable moment in this can be as broad and deep as you're willing to make it. These are often times when students are willing to talk from a deeper place. It would be wonderful for teachers to admit to students that they wish they had more time to just listen.

Keep holding onto the recognition that children are more resilient than we often think, but they're also vulnerable and need us for support. Have the courage to know that you don't have to do any of this perfectly. What your students most need is for you to BE there for them. They can sense your earnest caring of them. Listen more. Be close. They're all our children.... Keep letting them know that.

Let us know what else we can do to support you in these days. Don't hesitate to call or email; info in footer. Keep checking the web site for further uploads. My heart is so with our youth. I'm so grateful for all you do every school day.
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*Life is like an onion...
You peel it off, a layer at a time,
And sometimes you weep.*

Carl Sandburg