



*Lucy Daniels*

***Center for Early Childhood***

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Talking With Children About School Violence**

Worrisome events like school violence are terribly upsetting to all of us. It's hard enough for adults to make sense of such horrific events; just imagine how difficult it is for children to wrap their minds around concepts like violence, evil and death.

Children react in individual ways to scary events depending upon their age and psychological makeup. To help them understand frightening real-life events, such as school violence, wars, terrorist strikes, hurricanes and so forth, the Lucy Daniels Center recommends a three-part approach: (1) protecting and supporting, (2) discussing and (3) individualizing.

#### **Protecting and Supporting:**

- *Control access to information.* Children 6 years and younger cannot manage information about real dangers without experiencing excessive anxiety. Parents can best support their development by shielding them from scary information as much as possible, including all radio and TV news. Children ages 7 through 12 benefit from basic information, but may also suffer excessive anxiety if exposed to overly detailed information or images. Teenage children should have fuller access to information and images, but they still require protection from media bombardment, which can increase anxiety for teenagers and adults alike.

- *Provide support and diminish other family stresses.* If children learn of a disturbing event, parents should assume that their children will be shaken even if there are no obvious signs. This is a good time to provide increased support. Parental love is the most important source of comfort. There is no adequate substitute for hugs, hot cocoa, a game of Scrabble and

verbal reassurances.

- *Regularity is calming for children (and adults).* Change — whether positive or negative — tends to produce stress. Parents can reduce controllable sources of family stress by spending more time with their children or deferring an elective surgery, a nonessential overnight business trip, or even the adoption of a pet.

- *Maintain parental emotional balance.* Children have a sixth sense about how their parents really feel, and they can only feel safe if their parents are feeling safe. Since all parents are concerned by the reality that our schools are no longer safe havens, they must do their best to gain perspective and calm themselves, relying upon trusted people, faith, and stress reducing activities. Parents should restrict what they say in grown-up conversations within children's hearing, because it is often at those times that parents share their deepest worries.

**Discussing:** Words can help children master emotions, information and images. Parents should encourage discussions while respecting the preferences of those children who rely upon other means to work out difficult situations. Although children ages 6 and younger should learn as little as possible about school violence, parents should provide simple and reassuring explanations about anything they do learn. For example, if a 4-year-old asks about school violence (he or she just might hear about it from friends or siblings), parents could say: "A man hurt some children in a school far away. He is now dead, or, the police are taking care of him. Your school is safe and this will not happen here." Although parents can't be 100 percent sure that any school is safe, young children should not be exposed to each of life's remote dangers. There is a time for a bit of exaggerated reassurance, and early childhood is that time.

Children ages 7 through 12 benefit from more detailed discussions. Parents should be reassuring, clarifying the rarity of such events and the specific ways that their school keeps children safe. We recommend that parents emphasize their confidence in their children's teachers and principal. Children of this age are learning the rules of life, and they may have difficulty with events that violate expected order. This is an opportunity to discuss the fact that not all events in life follow rules or predictable patterns.

It's unlikely that school-age children will be interested in pondering the

unpredictability of life. Such is more likely the concern of teenagers, who are also inclined to want to understand the reasons for unpredictability and the violence in the world. School violence is an opportunity for parents to engage teens in discussions about larger topics, such as the role of a community in episodes of school violence and factors that lead someone to act violently. Parents can emphasize and demonstrate the positive actions that an individual can take to increase the order and goodness in the world. In this sense, tragedies can offer parents an important opportunity to help their children grow in their own personal commitment to constructive moral action.

Regardless of a child's age, parents should respect his or her views, even if they differ from their own. And, although parents should withhold frightening details from very young children, with the exception of the extra reassurance for young children, it is important that parents be honest. Distorting facts will shake children's confidence in their parents and may cause anxiety. Holding back all the details is a matter of good tact and judgment; protection is not the same as a lack of honesty.

Parents need not wait for their child to raise concerns. A dinner discussion between adults when there is not a preschooler around can provide children with an important opportunity to learn and to join the discussion. Just as adults need to talk to many people, children older than 7 can benefit from varied discussion about frightening current events.

**Individualizing:** It is important that parents make a judgment about how vulnerable each of their children might be to frightening news. Some children react more powerfully to worries than others. There are many reasons that some children are more reactive. For example, children who have had unexpected or traumatic events in their life may react strongly to reminders of life's unexpected dangers. Also, recent or current stresses in the family increase vulnerability to anxiety.

The signs that a child is excessively affected by news of school violence are very varied. Dreams about dangers occurring in school and excessive questioning about something happening to their school are clear signs of excessive worry. Worries about separation or about the safety of parents are also common reactions of children who are having excessive anxieties. However, excessive anxiety can take many subtle forms, including various

regressive symptoms. In preschoolers, common reactions are sleep difficulties, toileting problems, clinginess and temper tantrums; in school-age children and teens, psychosomatic physical complaints are common. Children who are reacting to school violence with such strong reactions may be the kind of children who benefit from more reassurance and stability of family life when a worry crosses their radar. If such extreme reactions to worrisome events continue for more than a month or two, or occur in other situations as well, professional consultation should be considered.

School violence is a painful aspect of our modern life. Although it strikes every parent in a vulnerable place, it is helpful when parents maintain perspective and use this disturbing reality to assist their child in developing protections against excessive anxiety. Violence in all its myriad forms is not likely to go away, but, with parental help, children can grow to be among those working to curb and address these problems in our society.