

Communiqué

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CRISIS PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

School Psychologists Must Be Involved in Planning and Conducting Active Shooter Drills

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A recent 2019 headline in *USA Today* is a critical example of why school psychologists need to be involved in planning active shooter drills. The headline read: “Terrified: Teachers, Kids Hit Hard by Shooter Drills” (Dastagir, 2019). Teachers at the elementary school in Monticello, Indiana, were left bruised, bleeding, and frightened after being shot execution style with plastic pellets during a drill. The *Indianapolis Star* follow-up story reported that the Indiana Teachers Association wants the use of projectiles in shooting drills banned, but the Senate Education Committee believes projectiles should be allowed so that teachers participating in the drills experience emotions and adrenaline (Herron, 2019). Articles such as these create more questions than answers. How should active shooter drills be conducted and how often? How can drills avoid traumatizing staff and students? How likely is it that a school shooting will occur and how safe are our schools? What is the critical role of school psychologists in planning and conducting these drills?

The organization Every Town USA (www.everytown.org) provided data for how many schools in the United States experienced a school shooting in each of the last 2 years. One school shooting is unacceptable, but it is important to know the exact incidence. In the 2016–2017 school year, there were 14 incidents where someone was shot at school. The vast majority of those incidents were accidental. In a number of the others, a student brought a gun to school and died by suicide. The 2017–2018 school year was particularly tragic, as there were 33 schools that experienced a school shooting. Three of those tragic shootings received extensive national news coverage (Marshall County, Kentucky; Parkland, Florida; and Santa Fe, Texas). Again, the vast majority of those 33 incidents were the accidental discharge of a weapon at school or a student suicide at school with a gun. While shootings are unlikely, due to the extensive media coverage of school shootings this is not the perspective that students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and local police have. It is important that we emphasize that a school shooting is a possibility but it is not a probability. There is extensive documentation that school shootings were more frequent in the 1990s than today and approximately 98–99% of violent deaths of children occur outside of school in our homes and communities (Fox & Delateur, 2014).

It is very important that schools be careful not to scare children about a place where they should feel safe. Thus, it is imperative that any active shooter drill be preceded by extensive education and preparation. Drills should be carefully planned by local police and the school crisis team, and school psychologists’ involvement is critical. School psychologists can help ensure that drills are conducted in a trauma-informed way while attending to the developmental needs of children. With training in research and program development, school psychologists can also assist in creating pre- and posttests to assess whether students and staff felt safer after the drill. Every single student and every single staff member has their own unique history with regard to trauma, and a realistic drill likely causes unresolved issues to surface for at least a few individuals. School psychologists can be

indispensable in providing support to those who are experiencing a strong reaction to an active shooter drill.

How often should an active shooter drill be conducted? This question can only be resolved after careful study. Historically, schools have conducted many fire drills, yet it has been decades since anyone was killed in a fire at a school. Active shooter drills are clearly more important today than fire drills. Recently, the state of Florida's School Safety Office recommended one active shooter drill a month at each school, but is that really best practice? Will staff and students feel safer and better prepared or will they view their school as an unsafe place? School psychologists need to be involved in not only planning active shooter drills, but also gathering data regarding the suggested frequency for effective drills and the impact these drills may have on staff and students. We outline below how drills can be traumatic for staff and students and provide an example of a very carefully planned and conducted active shooter drill that included extensive involvement from the school psychologist. We also call on all school psychologists to review the excellent guide, *Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills* from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO). This important guide was updated in April 2017.

Are Drills Traumatizing?

Another recent article in *The Atlantic* (Christakis, 2019) referred back to drills conducted in the 1950s for nuclear bombs, which led to fear in children, with 60% reporting nightmares. A more recent 2018 survey by the PEW Research Foundation found that 57% of teens worry about a shooting at school. *The Atlantic* article suggests that in doing drills "our efforts may exact a high price." On December 6, a Florida school initiated a lockdown saying, "This is not a drill." Students sobbed, vomited, and fainted while others sent goodbye messages to parents. *It was a drill*, and the resultant trauma was unnecessary.

A detailed analysis conducted by the *Washington Post* found that more than 4.1 million students experienced at least one lockdown drill in the 2017–2018 academic year, stating that "while most kids won't suffer long-term consequences, a meaningful percentage will" (Rich & Cox, 2018). Full-scale drills can be more traumatizing, and students with prior trauma histories may be at particular risk. For example, "children who live in high-crime urban neighborhoods may be more susceptible to stress during or after lockdowns ... because so many of them have been exposed to gunfire in their communities" (Rich & Cox, 2018). This only accounts for drills, and not the depth and breadth of potential trauma experienced in actual lockdowns in which a school or community is threatened. It remains true that school shootings are rare and schools continue to be the safest place for children (Christakis, 2019; NASP, 2018; Rich & Cox, 2018). However, due to the perceived increase in school violence, some schools are staging drills that include simulated bullet wounds, students pretending to be deceased, real guns shooting blanks, and students banging on classroom doors during a lockdown drill begging to be let in (Aronowitz, 2014). These are referred to as full-scale drills, and some states mandate them. There are many types of emergency drills, and NASP (2018) suggests that schools clearly differentiate them and practice multiple types of planned responses from evacuations (i.e., fire drills) to lockdowns.

Types of Drills

A *full-scale lockdown* is used when there is imminent danger. Staff and students make rooms seem unoccupied, windows and blinds are closed, doors are locked, and all sit quietly against a wall positioned away from the sightline of doors or windows. This can result in traumatic stress reactions. In a *secured perimeter/lockout*, all exterior doors are locked and no one may enter or leave the building. Teachers can continue with instruction, as authorized. These may be used when there is a

danger outside of the school campus, such as a robbery at a nearby bank. While still unnerving, this is less stressful than a full-scale lockdown. (NASP, 2018)

Are Drills Needed?

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2018) recommends that schools conduct drills to ease the stress reaction and ensure an adaptive response in the event that an actual lockdown occurs. NASP stresses the importance of these drills being carefully planned and integrated into the school's crisis protocol. Cathy Kennedy-Paine, head of NASP's crisis response team, states that drilling is "essential" and that when done with care, can protect students from physical injury in a real-life emergency (Rich & Cox, 2018). Drills provide an opportunity for students, staff, and first responders to practice procedures and identify challenges. Previously, most drills for first responders were done with no people in the building. Unfortunately, this does not allow participants the opportunity to build experience into their own real-life response where students may be encountered in common areas as they work to find an armed intruder. Teachers may learn how difficult it is to control students on their cell phones or keep children with disabilities quiet. Staff may realize some doors were not kept locked and some windows are difficult to shut. And, students may learn things like not to hide in bathroom stalls because automatic bathroom flushes may give them away (Aronowitz, 2014). Drills are therefore encouraged by many leading organizations including NASP and NASRO.

Case Example: A Trauma-Informed Approach

Full-scale drills should be carefully planned and thoughtfully conducted. One of the authors had the opportunity in the fall of 2018 to work with local first responders in developing a trauma-informed approach to active shooter drills. This was a collaborative effort to promote ongoing learning for the school staff, EMS providers, firefighters, law enforcement, the students, and their families. The planning team included public safety, school administration, and the school psychologist. Cooperation was also received from the county 911 center and the Pennsylvania Emergency Health Services Council. NASP (2018) stresses the importance of including the school psychologist in the planning process because of school psychologists' training in crisis mitigation and response. The trauma history of participants should be taken into account with accommodations provided when needed. During this particular full-scale drill, two students were identified by the school psychologist as having trauma histories related to guns. These students went into lockdown with their individual guidance counselors to provide a sense of comfort and safety and a place to debrief immediately upon the drill's conclusion.

NASP (2018) provides further suggestions for mitigating the potentially traumatizing effect of drills, beginning with an orientation to the lockdown so that participants know what to expect. All drills should be announced in advance, and school psychologists are key in ensuring effective communication to all stakeholders. Not only was this drill announced to staff and students prior to implementation, but parents were also informed. A detailed letter was sent home educating parents on the purpose of the drill and how the drill would not only help the school community, but also increase the effectiveness of first responders. Interestingly, there was no increase in the rate of school absences on the day of the drill. The morning of the drill, students and staff were again reminded of the drill timing and how to respond to ensure that they were ready. The principal communicated with faculty and staff through Remind, a text messaging system, and staff were updated throughout the process. NASP suggests that the onset of the drill be stated in a clear manner such as, "This is a drill." Public safety refers to this as the advantage of plain language. Using code words such as "code red" is not recommended, because some staff may forget what this means, and substitutes or visitors in the building will have no idea how to respond.

The school psychologist ensured that reminders of the drill were posted on the school's Twitter and Facebook feeds, and the police department posted social media alerts notifying the community that there would be multiple police cars, EMS vans, and fire trucks on the scene for training. NASP (2018) stresses the importance of posting these messages "to prevent rumors or confusion in the community." The school also provided advance notice to nearby facilities and educational partners. This is exceptionally important so that other schools do not inadvertently enact response protocols. It also allowed the neighboring preschool to choose to keep their children inside at the time of the lockdown. Finally, it was posted on the large sign on the school's front lawn that a lockdown *drill* was being conducted.

Captain Johnson, coordinator of the local shooter rescue task force, directed the exercise. In his executive summary of the exercise, Captain Johnson stated that "in response to industry criticisms that it was taking too long to locate wounded victims in mass shooting events, public safety agencies around the country are developing protocols to introduce rapid evacuation procedures for victims." This drill was not taken lightly, and first responders engaged in significant training prior to drill implementation. A safety plan was developed to mitigate training risks. This included the replacement of duty weapons with plainly obvious training replicas at an off-campus location so that no guns were near the school building.

While all students were present and practiced the lockdown, only theater students from the local community college were permitted to volunteer as actors to portray injured or deceased victims. The rationale for even needing victims was that this was a training for EMS to practice new protocols for responding to those injured while police continued to seek out the active shooter. Two classrooms of student volunteers were asked to flee their classroom in a nondramatic fashion (no screaming, etc.) to give first responders a feel for students running toward them and through them while they are working. These senior classrooms were chosen carefully, the school psychologist debriefed them before and after the lockdown, and students were allowed the opportunity to opt out. Students seemed proud to have a role that was helping to train first responders. First responders were instructed not to have purposeful contact with any student and to function at half speed for added safety. The school psychologist also briefed teachers in detail and provided education regarding traumatic stress reactions and referral procedures should concerns arise. To further mitigate trauma potential, baseball bats were used to mimic a sound for officers to locate and no simulated firearms were discharged at any time. It was deemed important that a sound be utilized since part of the training need for police was to seek out the source of the sound (the active shooter). It was clearly communicated to students that they would hear this sound, what it was, and the rationale for it.

Classes did great with keeping silent (no sounds were heard from any room). This exercise was comprehensively documented through multiple professional videographers, public safety cameras, a drone, and the school CCTV system. In an effort to demonstrate transparency, the training event was also covered extensively by both local television and print media, with no negative feedback. There were zero calls to the school regarding concern of parents, stakeholders, or community members. A few additional steps to be considered include providing staff with ongoing professional development on school safety and including lockdown drill information in the school handbook with both a rationale and description of procedures.

Student Perspectives

One student interviewed Captain Johnson for the school newspaper, reporting that this drill was particularly valuable for first responders' practice. Since that initial publication, raw video footage was shown to the state EMS medical director, and he immediately approved its inclusion in a training course to be delivered to all paramedics and EMTs serving in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As predicted in the school newspaper, the drill was also made into a 1-hour television special for the

Danish Television program, Police Chase. The newspaper article concluded by stating that the drill showed that the school community “is all for promoting school safety.” Not only were students able to practice a lockdown, but they were able to help create a training module to help first responders state-wide.

A senior student was also interviewed because he was in one of the classrooms asked to flee for the drill. He shared that he knew the drill was happening, so there was no anxiety. He felt prepared as his class had been instructed on what to do. He further stated that “it was a great opportunity; it instilled in me that we, as a school, care about safety.” From his perspective, the event ran smoothly and as planned. When asked what could have been done differently, he simply reiterated that students and parents were well informed. He added further insight that this event has also helped prepare him as he goes to college. For example, he feels he will know what to do, and where to hide, if something happens in a college quad. He also finds that he has become more aware of the exits at his current job and thinks carefully about what he would do if safety was threatened. This student has transferred skills learned to other settings, and this makes him feel less anxious, not more. Overall, he appreciated “being a face in the movement for safety.”

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