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Toolkits for Talking to Early Childhood Learners About School Violence

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By [Tanika Johnson, EdD, MA, LPC-MHSP, LMHC, NCC, BC-TMH, CCTP](#) on June 22, 2022

Categories: [School-based](#), [Speech Pathology](#)



Content Warning: This article discusses the topic of school violence which some readers may find sensitive in nature.

Trauma is unbounded and affects children of all races, ethnicities, ages, genders, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.¹

In the wake of school violence and traumatic loss, children can experience psychological distress, emotional trauma, and long-term physical and mental health disorders and symptoms.² School violence is a public health, human rights, and social injustice problem for school communities.

As school-based professionals, our overarching goal is to promote social and emotional development and physiological safeguards by incorporating psychological and physical safety initiatives to eradicate this widespread epidemic. These initiatives support positive peer and adult interactions and alleviate high-risk behaviors and adversarial social situations.

The Magnitude of School Violence



behaviors, weight gain, and higher risks of chronic diseases.³

School Safety, School Culture, and Educational Systems

As it pertains to the security of our children, American educational systems must reexamine the relationships between the following:

1. Race and ethnicity and school safety
2. Cultural and structural inequities
3. School climate, school culture, and disciplinary practices
4. Bullying, trauma, and peer victimization ⁴

Educational stakeholders must implement culturally responsive school violence programs, anti-racist systems of discipline, school-wide social justice initiatives, as well as bullying, peer victimization, and trauma interventions. Stakeholders must also advocate for crisis prevention, social and emotional support, and behavioral health consultations, and mental health referrals.

Ending school violence is a multifaceted task requiring the ideologies, evidenced-based frameworks, fiscal capacity, and constant investment of all stakeholders. All of the aforementioned components are critical for engaging in developmentally appropriate conversations with early childhood learners about their school safety and providing action steps for securing their classrooms and school environments.

Toolkits for Talking to Early Childhood Learners About School Violence

Below are two separate toolkits that school-based professionals can utilize both in working with students who have been impacted by school violence and the families of the affected students.

School-Based Professional Toolkit #1: Providing Aid to Students

1. Create a Trained Network of Support

In the aftermath of school violence, it is vital to assemble school-based professional support teams who can create a safe space to help children express their thoughts, identify and understand painful emotions, acknowledge grief symptoms, and validate school safety concerns.

2. Engage Families in the Support Network

While children are grappling with traumatic loss, school-based professionals are encouraged to engage parents and families in effectively monitoring of their psychological symptoms—particularly acute stress, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and/or depression.

3. Facilitate Open Communication

When children are emotionally and mentally ready, empower them to ask questions and communicate their perceptions of the traumatic event. For clarity, ask open-ended questions to seek their level of understanding. Empathetically replace misunderstandings with factual and developmentally appropriate information. Reinforce their strengths and need for normalcy and predictability.

4. Provide Age-Appropriate Information

For kindergarten through second grade learners, maintain brief explanations, ensure safety and pre-cautionary measures are communicated, and permit the release of emotions through drawing and imaginative play. Support upper elementary learners by answering their queries around school safety plans and acknowledging the reality of such a traumatic event.

School-Based Professional Toolkit #2: Guidance for Parents and Families

1. Initiate Communication

Initiate parent, child and family time for discussing the trauma. Exercise patience as your child is processing the aftermath of an inconceivable tragedy. Encourage emotional language and healthy expression of emotions. Support your child by communicating the following: “No matter how terrifying the event, you can always talk to me about it.” Gauge your

child's understanding of the traumatic event by actively listening, asking open-ended and clarifying questions, and acquiring a baseline understanding of how they are interpreting the trauma.

2. Limit the Influx of Information

Assess and reduce the child's internet, television, and social media exposure. Determine the developmental appropriateness of news coverage for your child ⁴ For young children, the recurrence of school violence media exposure can be detrimental to cognitive and social and emotional development. Children could become highly susceptible to the harmful effects of news coverage. These factors may contribute to anxiety and fear as well as retraumatization, revictimization, and complicated grief.

3. Address Needs & Monitor Behavior

Maintain consistency with morning, afternoon, and bedtime routines and schedules. This will reinforce your child's need for emotional, mental, and physical stability. Be on the lookout for any signs and symptoms of anxiety, dependency, and increased startle response, along with nightmares and related stressors. Solicit support from a school-based professional, primary care provider, and/or mental health clinician.

4. Develop Strategies for Working Through Emotions

Offer transparency, honest communication, and validation around your child's fears. Talk about school safety protocols and develop a safety plan. If psychologically and physiologically ready, discuss developmentally appropriate conflict resolution strategies for coping with traumatic loss (i.e., cooling down, sharing, listening, and checking for understanding, being accountable, and brainstorming solutions).

School-Based Professional Insider Tip: Peer-to-Peer Emotional and Social Support Groups

Consider a discussion of peer-to-peer relationships among students grieving and healing. Professionally facilitated peer-to-peer support groups can aid in alleviating feelings of isolation by allowing students to relate their feelings to those that are expressed by their peers. Additionally, these spaces can help students reestablish a sense of safety within their school community after a collective trauma has occurred.

Moving Forward Together

Walking down the halls with friends, listening to the morning announcements, and engaging in learning centers and workstations should be the highlights of a young learner's day. Early childhood spaces should be filled with smiling faces where school-based professionals are helping children develop their abilities, not bullet ridden desks from which fearful texts are being sent. From driving through the car lane to kissing a child goodbye, a parent's last memory should be a pleasant one versus a paralyzing phone call followed by traumatic loss. The unfortunate reality that the world we and our children deserve is not the world we are living in at the moment. These tools can help provide students and families with the essential support they need to grieve, heal, and move forward, while providing school-based professionals with the framework to navigate unimaginably difficult circumstances.

Resources for School-based Professionals

Even in the face of school violence and tragic outcomes, school-based professionals somehow muster the ability to protect our most vulnerable populations. While this kind of altruism is admirable, it is vital to recognize early signs of compassion fatigue. School-based professionals have a higher propensity for experiencing secondary traumatic stress.⁵ If you are a school-based professional facing unforeseen life stressors, consider applying the following tips, tools, and resources for stress management and positive self-care.

1. Be kind to yourself. Embrace positive [self-affirmations](#). In the mirror, practice saying, "I'm having a rough time but I'll make it through. I'm strong and I can move through this pain. This is hard and I'm doing my best."⁶
2. Using your [imagination](#) envision leaving every painful emotion and memory behind you. Visualize compiling the emotions, balling them up, and placing each in a box. Picture yourself walking, swimming, biking, or jogging away your painful emotions. Imagine your thoughts as an undesirable song or television sitcom as you are adjusting the channel or turning down the volume. While your racing thoughts are competing for your attention, you do not have to entertain them. Engage in [thought-stopping](#) and quieting your inner voice.
3. Incorporate the [90-Day Gratitude Journal: A Mindful Practice for a Lifetime of Happiness](#). Gratitude journals serve as tools for being intentional, purposeful, and grateful. Acknowledging your appreciation for what you have creates space for negative energy to transform into

positive energy, and provides emotional and mental stability and the regulation of traumatic reactions to stressful life events.

4. Schedule uninterrupted time for working through the [Anxiety Skills Workbook: Simple CBT and Mindfulness Strategies for Overcoming Anxiety, Fear, and Worry](#). Inside of this workbook, you will find modules and activities for mindful relaxation, rethinking thoughts, detached awareness, and related topics.

Below, watch MedBridge instructor [Quinn Tyminski](#) discuss **signs and symptoms of mental illness** in this short clip from her course, "[Crisis Intervention and Suicidality](#)."



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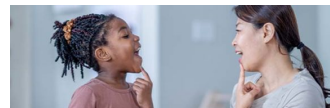
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