

'You aren't alone'

Advocates: Talk to kids about school threats

Communicating about trauma is key to beating it, local experts say

BY DAVID HURST
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The thought of a local school becoming the target of a violent attack can be frightening.

"The message needs to be for everyone: 'No matter what you're going through, you aren't alone.'"

ADAM KLEINMAN,
TRAUMA THERAPIST

But even though recent threats to schools in the region have been either thwarted by law enforcement or determined to be unfounded, the topic should still be talked about – by parents and their children, school and law enforcement officials, and members of the community as a whole, two area mental health experts said this week.

Communication not only is the best way to cope with unsettling incidents, but also can be the key to prevent similar incidents in the future – a lesson learned from some of America's deadliest school attacks, said Adam Kleinman, a certified trauma therapist and clinical director for Choices Clinical Counseling.

"When incidents like this are reported, everyone should be communicating about it," said Kleinman.

Please see **TALK**, A2



TODD BERKEY/THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Jason Hunter, Westmont Hilltop School District school police officer, greets students at an entrance to Westmont Hilltop High School on Thursday. Hunter's job is part of a district security apparatus that is always improving, district officials said in the wake of high-profile alleged threats to their schools.

'School safety is always evolving'

Threats case puts security in spotlight at Westmont Hilltop

BY JOSHUA BYERS
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Westmont Hilltop High School students are greeted each morning at the door by the school police officer or security guards, an administrator and a school counselor.

Students are asked to remove hats and hoods as they enter the building, and if a student is noticed acting out of character, educators are quick to check in and make sure

everything is OK. Procedures at the elementary school are similar.

The district's security measures include hundreds of cameras, visitor screenings and numerous mental health supports for students.

"School safety is always evolving," Superintendent Thomas Mitchell said. "We're always learning."

Westmont Hilltop has been

Please see **SAFETY**, A2



Mitchell

TALK

Continued from A1

Trend of threats

Law enforcement officials responded to eight threat incidents involving area schools in the 35 days from Jan. 2 to Feb. 6.

Threats against a Conemaugh Valley school dance and Greater Johnstown and Westmont Hilltop schools led police to file charges against minors – the most recent of which involved a juvenile accused of posting threatening notes at two Westmont Hilltop schools on two separate days before being apprehended Feb. 6. Other reported threats were deemed to be unfounded.

But when a threat is made against a school, the act itself “causes trauma,” regardless of whether or not it ends up being deemed credible, added Derik Berkebile, a Richland Township-based licensed clinical social worker.

‘It’s about listening’

For many people – parents included – school violence can be a difficult subject to talk about, evoking uncomfortable memories of deadly attacks on students at Columbine, Sandy Hook and other schools, Berkebile said.

But families should talk about it nevertheless, he said.

His advice to parents: Ask children if they have any thoughts or worries.

“I think there’s sort of a fear that talking about this kind of thing puts fear into children,” he said, “but sitting down and asking your child if they have any concerns about something that happened at school – or about a threat – isn’t going to cause fear. It’s the threat itself that does that.”

If left to sort out difficult, stressful situations on their own, children can have a tendency to “bury” their thoughts and feelings, Kleinman said.

“It starts with loving, connected parenting,” he said. “It’s about listening to what they say.”

Parents should believe children and work to alleviate their concerns, perhaps by calling their school to get more answers that can help reassure

them about a situation, Kleinman and Berkebile said.

Families should also pay attention if children raise concerns about unusual behaviors by other students, too, they said.

“If they tell you something odd that happens at school, alert their school and share it with authorities,” said Kleinman. “Time after time, we’ve seen cases where there were ‘warning signs’ before terrible shootings, but nobody said anything about it.”

Traumatic events can impact children differently.

Parents can ease those concerns through care and communication, Kleinman and Berkebile said. Schools across the region also offer in-house support when tragedies and unexpected events occur.

But Kleinman and Berkebile urged people to be aware of sudden changes in children that might signify that they need outside support.

“When you start seeing sudden behavior changes, resistance or truancy issues, those are (flags) that they need help,” Berkebile said. Sudden appetite loss, vomiting, agitation and “fight-or-flight responses” are other signs, he added.

Schools need to communicate, too

Over the last two months, some parents have said that some districts and law enforcement agencies have been more forthcoming than others about alleged threats in which juveniles have been charged with crimes.

Some Westmont Hilltop parents have expressed frustration about what they said was the lack of details released in the latest case, with school officials directing some questions to the Cambria County District Attorney’s Office.

The local mental health experts who spoke with The Tribune-Democrat this week did not delve into any specific school threat cases.

But speaking generally, Berkebile said schools also have to play a role in the communication process during difficult times.

“By not communicating or miscommunicating information about a potentially dangerous situation, parents aren’t able to make informed deci-

sions about their children’s safety,” he said. “They won’t be able to alleviate some of those traumatic effects ... or make a decision on what to do about it. ... No parent wants to feel powerless to help their child.”

“I think a lot of schools are doing a great job right now communicating their communities – as they should,” Kleinman said.

“When you don’t have accurate information or details aren’t being communicated, people panic. They start filling in the blanks themselves and can make things worse.”

‘Not alone’

Kleinman said children today are living in difficult times.

Their routines were interrupted by the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 – and a 2021 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study showed a sharp rise in mental distress among children. One in five reported suicidal thoughts, Kleinman noted.

With social media a constant part of children’s lives, there’s often no escape from their stressors. That also applies to a far smaller percentage of teens – the tiny fraction who decide to plan out attacks on schools and classmates each year, they said.

“People who are hurt hurt people,” Kleinman said. “With kids at this age, school feels like it’s their entire life.”

And for one reason or another, some children get to a point where they feel they they have no other alternatives.

Rather than turning to someone for support, they look for ways to inflict harm on themselves and others around them, he said.

“The message needs to be for everyone: ‘No matter what you’re going through, you aren’t alone,’” Kleinman said.

And help is available at any time.

“The good thing now is that more people understand now that there’s nothing wrong with reaching out and asking for help,” he said. “Mental health isn’t as (stigmatized) as it was before. There’s a huge focus on it today.”

David Hurst is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram @TDDavidHurst.