

In Response to the Shooting in Texas. May 2022

Any time there is high media coverage of a mass casualty school event, students have anxiety.

With younger students/children:

Consider how you might open the conversation. Instead of the adult bringing up the shooting, you might start by asking students/children questions that allow them to reveal to you what they know and what concerns them. Often in our rush to reassure children, we bring up details they hadn't known, causing additional anxiety. Using questions helps limit the conversation to their concerns without adding to their worries. You might begin with:

- *Sometimes adults don't know all the things kids are thinking, so today I wanted to take a little time for us to talk about the kinds of things you think about.*
 - *What kinds of things do kids think about when they're outside playing/at recess? Let students talk about whatever comes up.*
 - *What kinds of things do kids think about when they're falling asleep at night?*
 - *What kinds of things worry kids your age?*

By starting with general questions first, then moving toward anxiety, it allows the greater context of life to be a part of the conversation. Students are apt to feel more vulnerable or defensive if we ask, "What do you think?" than if we ask, "What do kids your age think?" When we make the kids the experts about their peers, it is much less confrontive for them. Of course, they're most likely to tell us what they think, because that's their frame of reference.

When one of the kids brings up the shooting, you might reply with:

- *I did hear about that also. And I wondered how many of you had already heard about that?*
- *Often when something happens, even though it is a long way away, we worry it might happen to us. That is something our principal and all of us have been thinking about for a long time. Remember how we do drills for fires and other things? That's why. We adults have been thinking about what we all need to know in case something frightening happens. So we're doing what we can think of to keep us all safe. Now I'd like to hear what **you** think would help kids feel safer? You notice that we're shifting the focus of the conversation to do two things – one is to empower students to put their own words to their fears and what they need, and the other is for us to hear what we might do that will help.*
- *When are the times you think kids worry the most? This is an opportunity for kids to mention that they worry when they walk in the front door of the school or when they are trying to fall asleep. As kids bring up their concerns, first ask the speaker, *Is there something you can think of that might be helpful?* Then, *Does anybody else have any ideas that might help?* If you have ideas, add those at the end.*
- *What do you wish adults understood about this? This is a profound question to ask children. It communicates that you are taking their suggestions and needs into account. You don't need to make any promises with this. You don't have to say that you'll do what they ask. Some possible responses might be:*

- *I wouldn't have thought of that.*
- *I will be sure the principal hears about this suggestion.*
- *What is one thing we could do in our classroom that would help with that?*

If no child brings up the shooting, *Has there been anything in the news... or Did any of you hear about what happened in Texas?* Use your own judgement if they're very young about whether to introduce it if they don't already know. In most elementary classrooms, at least some students will already know.

Possible replies to specific questions or concerns:

- I'm afraid it might happen here (or to us at our school).
 - *When something like this happens, even if it is a long way away, lots of us worry it might happen here. One thing is that there are thousands of schools, and this happened in one school on one day. It is scary, but very few people would ever do something like this.*
- I get really scared.
 - *One thing we can do that helps is to take a deep belly breath, and then a couple more.*
- I have trouble sleeping or I have nightmares.
 - *Sometimes we think we shouldn't wake up someone in our family, but when something like this has happened, that might be OK to do. When you get home from school today, ask people in your family whether you can come let them know if you're having trouble falling asleep because you feel afraid, or whether you can wake someone if you have a bad dream.*
- I heard one of the kids laughing about this and saying it would be cool to do this.
 - *For sure, if anyone says something like that, or that worries you, let adults know right away.*

One thing to remember is that just being able to voice their fears and have a thoughtful, caring adult listening provides some relief for most youth. And when you're able to implement a measure they suggest, this sends a helpful message to them.

Talking about fears one time isn't enough for students to learn coping skills or master those fears. For that reason, holding intentional conversations routinely with classes about life's challenges is essential. One is that then, when you want to have a conversation about something huge and specific (like this shooting) it is not so out-of-the-ordinary for students to be able to talk about their emotions and reactions. Also, teaching coping strategies needs to happen all year long. The student whose parents decide to get divorced in the spring may not remember the coping strategies for anger that were taught in the fall. These conversations need to happen often.

Finally, be sure that students know that you want them to let you know any time they're feeling worried about something, that they don't have to wait until you hold a class discussion on it.

A note to adults: Some of how we need to frame these conversations lack much of the bigger picture, i.e., talking about how rare this is. It isn't rare, but the risk for students is less than 1 in 2.5 million. The older the student, the more "whole picture" you can include in your conversations.



Helping Students Learn to Cope with Anxiety

Especially when terrible mass casualty school shootings are covered in the news, many students have heightened anxiety. There are a number of easy strategies students can learn to help manage the discomfort of fear and anxiety.

Ideas for coping:

Students, let's practice a couple of things we can do when we're feeling anxious to help ourselves calm down. This first activity is the most basic and important in calming our neurological selves.

- 1. Let's all just sit up straight and relax our eyes – you could close them or just look down at the floor. Put one hand on your tummy, right over your tummy button. When you breathe in – slowly - breathe way deep so it makes that hand move outward. When you relax and exhale, it will come in again. Continue to lead them in more “belly breaths.” Keep the pace slow.*
- 2. Hold your hand up like this (holding your palm toward your body with your fingers a bit in front of your mouth). Imagine that each finger is a pretend birthday candle. You're going to blow them out the very slowest you can, one at a time. OK let's all inhale a deep breath down into our bellies, and now slowly, slowly blow out one pretend candle – start with your thumb. Continue to show them how to do this, instructing them slowly to blow out all ten imaginary candles.*
- 3. Let's all sit up straight with our hands flat on our desks/tables and our feet on the floor. We're going to do some imagining, and we're going to be using deep, deep breathing down into our bellies as we do this. Sometimes it is easier to picture something if we close our eyes. Ready? When you inhale, imagine sunshine coming down on your head. (Pause to give them time for inhaling.) As you exhale, imagine that your hands and feet are growing roots like a tree grows down into the earth. As you exhale, push those roots down further and further into the earth. (Continue narrating and encouraging for several breaths. Inhale sunshine, exhale grow roots.)*
- 4. Sometimes we can help ourselves feel less anxious when we get physically active in certain ways. Let's try one of those. Everyone stand up. We're going to lift one knee and touch it with the hand on that same side of the body (demonstrate) and then lift the other knee and touch it with the hand on **that** side of the body. (Students may giggle some, but see if you can get them to do this in a calm fashion, and slowly. It isn't a race! Set an internet metronome for 45 beats per minute, which is about every 1.5 seconds. After they've mastered this, lead them in switching to touch the knee with the opposite hand – right knee and left hand, etc. Rhythmic motions that use alternating sides of the body have a calming effect. That's why people pace when they're nervous.)*
- 5. Aerobic activity helps run off the adrenaline that anxiety produces. Shoot baskets. Run laps!*
- 6. This activity is helpful for students old enough to make sense of statistics. Fill a glass gallon jar with one color of sand and add just one grain of a contrasting color. Each grain of sand in the jar represents a school in America. On the day of the shooting in Texas, one school went through a terrible tragedy. We tend to think it is happening everywhere. This is to help us visualize how many schools that day didn't have anything bad happen. Then turn the jar around and around*

and let the kids see how many grains there are of one color and how unlikely it is that they can see the contrasting grain as the jar turns.

7. This might be the most empowering and important activity you could do. Engage in democracy. Help students write a letter to your federal elected officials. For younger classes, you could write the letter that includes their comments and let them each draw a picture to put into the envelope. For older students, each could write their own letter. For older students, you could put a few sentence starters on the board.

Dear (name of legislator),

I am in __ grade and we are talking about the shooting that happened in Texas this week.

(Tell the person how you feel when you think about it.)

(Tell the person what you think should be done about it.)

(Add whatever else you want that person to know.)

For older students

It is worth taking a moment to think about the importance of starting the conversation in a way that will invite youth into more conversation with less defensiveness or vulnerability. One way of doing that is making the youth the “the expert.” So instead of mentioning the shooting and asking whether your child/student is anxious, consider framing it something like, “There was a lot of coverage on the news about [what happened Texas on Tuesday] [the shooting in Texas on Tuesday]. When a shooting happens, how do you think that affects [your peers] [students] [kids your age]?” And then just listen. We often jump in too quickly to reassure youth, when what they really want and need is for us to listen to all of their concerns. When we move too quickly to reassurance, we stop the conversation at that point. It is far more effective to ask them to tell us more and to keep them going deeper. Then, still, instead of offering reassurances, engage youth in conveying their thoughts about a range of ideas or possible solutions:

- What might help students feel safer in school? (Or, “... be safer in school?”)
- What could parents do to help youth feel safe? What could teachers do?
- What kinds of things has our school done that address school safety?
- When kids at this school are concerned, who are some of the people who listen?
- What can students do when what’s being said on social media makes them anxious?
- What do kids wish adults understood about what it is like to be a teen today?

Questions such as those allow adults to learn a lot about what will help youth feel safe. When we make assumptions and provide immediate reassurances, we lose that opportunity. What we need to know is what will help youth feel safe, and that is what they identify rather than what we adults might assume.



Helpful concepts:

- Although we hear about mass casualty events, we never hear news that tells us that “today 50 million students went to school and everybody came home alive. However, 12 children died today of gun violence outside of school.” That doesn’t make the news. School shootings are not what makes gun-related deaths the leading cause of childhood death in the US.
- News coverage of one event reaches all of us in all regions of the country, and it makes it seem like this is what is happening in many schools. The immediacy and imagery of news coverage makes *this* kind of gun-related death appear to be the leading cause of youth gun-related deaths. In reality, about the same number of kids who die in school shootings per year will die in gun-related violence **each day** but those deaths don’t make the news.
- If we were to take a gallon jar and fill it with sand to give an illustration of how few students actually die in a school shooting, we would need 2,500,000 (2.5 million) grains of sand and just one grain of a contrasting color to represent how rare *school-related* gun deaths are.

It might be helpful to remember that the likelihood of a child dying in a school shooting is 1/2.5 million, and the likelihood that a child will die of a gunshot wound outside of school (in their own home or the home of a neighbor, for instance) is 1/1,600. It is helpful for us to keep our own sense of context in all of this. Recognizing this helps us keep our own perspective and perhaps helps us take a deep breath and listen to youth rather than interrupting conversation with our own solutions or ideas. The greatest outcome of these conversations is when we leave youth knowing that we are willing for them to talk with us about anything. An expression in the crisis response community is, “never waste a crisis,” and this is your opportunity as well – don’t waste this opportunity to connect deeply with your children, setting the stage for more open communication about all kinds of things in the future.

Youth are very able to read our nonverbal messages, our body language and our tendency to steer conversations away from those topics that are uncomfortable for us. When something is so out-of-the-ordinary, we don’t really know what will be helpful, and because we don’t want to make it worse, we often avoid talking about it. Or we make general statements we hope will reduce fears, which then shuts off our listening to their need. This often leaves youth making up stories to fill in the blanks of their understanding and of their fears. For teens and tweens, this drives them to social media, which takes their conversation away from adult inclusion and the wisdom of caring adults.

Some additional questions might include:

- How will I know if you are bothered by this later?
- What are some things that might be helpful for us to talk about in the next few days?
- Sometimes kids have trouble sleeping when they’re anxious. How can I be sure that, if you want to sleep closer to us, you’ll let us know? (It is fine for youth to bring sleeping bags into their parents room so they don’t feel anxious when they’re trying to sleep. If this persists for more than a week or so, it might be a good idea to get in touch with the school counselor and ask for ideas or coping strategies.)

As adults we often forget that, “I don’t know, but let’s continue talking about this,” is a perfectly acceptable answer. We’re used to having the answers, but when times are troubling, we’re often even more motivated to have answers than we are patient to listen! Your kids need to know that you’re



willing to listen much more than they need for you to have a ready answer. In fact, when we offer reassurance too quickly, kids often feel like we're not really listening.

Finally, when wrapping up conversations of this sort, you might bring it into the moment:

- What do you need me to know right now?
- Will you come get me if you have trouble sleeping tonight?
- Is there something I could do that would be helpful right now?

Keep a hopeful tone, focusing on solutions.

Social Media:

With social media being a part of youth's lives from such an early age, we need to make extraordinary attempts to reach youth when these major events occur. Digital natives – youth for whom social media has always been a part of their lives – are apt to look to their peers for support in the aftermath of troubling events, and all of that happens out of our view. Unless adults in kids' lives bring something up in conversation, youth often assume that they "should" be able to cope with it on their own. That means youth have only the level of wisdom of their peers to help see them through these difficult times. Better that they have conversations with adults who bring context and provide a sense of safety.

Seeking mental health support

Kids often won't volunteer that they need to see a counselor. Most will try to cope with it themselves, even if they're miserable. Too, many will brush off encouragement for them to see a counselor. One helpful way to get youth in the door is this kind of concept: *What you're coping with is unfamiliar territory for me. I usually know how to support you, but I'd like some guidance from someone. If you'd come along, you could let me know which of their suggestions might work and which you don't like.*

Some General Thoughts

- For now, try to keep usual routines, particularly for those kids who struggle with change or anxiety. Let students know when you can anticipate a change and give the warning when possible.
- Limit everyone's exposure to media, especial visual or video media. We can't erase horrific images from our minds, and everything we need to know can be read.
- Families should spend more time together in non-screen non-digital activities. Board games. Cards
- Get outside. Take walks. Adults – model healthy behaviors.
- With all conversations, keep the child's age and developmental stage in mind.
- Be mindful to listen more than you speak.
- Use open-ended questions (not "yes/no" questions) to gain more insights from them.
- Giving kids a sense of agency or control is helpful. Look for ways for them to be a part of some kind of action. Suggest doing a fundraising drive, writing letters to elected officials, hosting a dialog among students, or let them generate ideas from which they can choose.
- For schools, suspend lock-down drills for now. Wait till everyone feels a little more grounded.
- Think of the kids who are already depressed or anxious and find extra support for them if needed.