

School Violence and Your Role as a Mental Health Provider

Shawn S. Sidhu, M.D.

ssidhu@salud.unm.edu

References

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Roswell



There are a variety of roles mental health providers may play in the event of a school shooting

In some cases, mental health providers may be incorporated into the school effort or even asked to help guide a team effort

In other cases, mental health providers will be charged with providing services for children and families in affected areas, such as individual or family therapy and medication management

What would be your first task if faced
with heading up a crisis response
following an episode of school violence?

ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE!

What communication style would be most effective in this situation?

Communication with Team

It is of the utmost importance that all team members are on the same page, as consistency helps children to feel safe in this situation

The SIMPLER and CLEARER the communication plan, the better

Role descriptions need to be clearly defined (avoid dual roles if at all possible)

What gets in the way of clear and simple communication in these types of situations?

Stress/Countertransference

Providers or team members may have personal connections to those who were harmed or the community as a whole

Cases may be high profile/high stakes, and there may be a sense of national media pressure for providers.

Similarly providers may be nervous about legal/forensic implications.

What Can You Do About This?

Observe your own thoughts and feelings, and try to understand how these thoughts and feelings might impact your performance

Others, particularly the children, will be able to detect feelings of fear, anxiety, and sadness in providers. Team members will need to be able to provide a feeling of security and safety for children.

There may be utility in seeking professional consultation, peer support, or even your own therapy

For team members who are very traumatized, it may be better to take time off and heal

Parent: “I don’t think we should talk to the kids about the violence. It might make things worse.” What is your response?

Communication with Kids

Much in the same way as talking about suicide, talking about violent episodes in school does not trigger further episodes of violence

Some communication will be necessary to educate kids and parents around what to expect and provide some guidelines

What should your first step be with kids and families prior to providing recommendations?

Meet with kids and families and find out how they are doing and what their specific concerns are. This way you can add the content of these issue to the message you provide to the community

Are there any differences in the way that kids and parents should be addressed in these situations?

Kids

The message to kids will need to be tailored to their developmental level and understanding of violence. Ideally, you wouldn't address more than a class size at a time (no large assemblies or video/radio addresses). This may require that administrators come to multiple class rooms.

Parents

Can be a written address (newsletter or e-mail). Can also hold a town hall style meeting or a lunch for parents.

*Very important to make yourself transparently available

How do children differ developmentally in their ability to understand violence and death?

While there is tremendous variability, children typically understand the finality of death at 5 years of age

School age children (1st grade to 8th grade) understand death concretely, and therefore their reactions can be immature.

High school students have a much better ability to understand both the finality and the complexity of death, as well as the potential affect on the community. Thus, they can be relied upon more heavily in recovery efforts.

What are some ways that school age children might react in an inappropriate way to the stress of an act of school violence?

Mostly pertaining to school age children, who have a hard time showing they're scared or feel threatened

Younger children may reenact the violence or use play violence to imitate the violent act

There may be inappropriate jokes

Some less regulated children may become angry or act out

What would you actually say to the kids
when you address them?

Provide basic details like a police officer would, and leave out graphic details as well as speculative information such as a person's intentions when committing a violent act

The thrust of the message should convey that students are safe, and should explain what has been done to insure this safety

Lastly, kids should be told to come to adults if they are having a hard time, or if they notice that other children are struggling.

Keep in mind that children in these situations have an incredible amount of variety in terms of exposure to the incident. Some children may have been out of town or know very little, while others may have actually been harmed, witnessed harm, or be very close to others who have been harmed

Thus it is important to keep your approach flexible as you will be helping children with a range of experiences

What should you tell parents after an episode of school violence?

Parents are anxious and nervous in these situations and a few simple tips can go a long way

Conveying how much to talk about and how to talk about it in a developmentally appropriate way can be helpful

Be sure to limit television exposure and conversations at home so as to not overload children

Reinforce to children that they are safe

Be sure to encourage people stick to their usual routines, as this helps children to feel safe

What are “normal” responses to trauma in this situation. How about “pathological?”

Help parents understand normal and more worrisome responses to the event

Adjustment disorder with depressed and anxious mood would be a common response

Acute Stress Disorder may be accompanied by a decline in functioning, panic, dissociation, and even soft psychosis

Major Depressive Disorder or Brief Psychotic Disorder are rare

In adolescents be on the lookout for substance use

After communicating with parents and students around what to expect, what else can you do?

Additional Resources

Gather a list of resources in the community for families, including mental health providers and support services in the community

Reach out to mental health providers in the area as well as families to insure that there are enough providers to meet the demand

If necessary, pull providers temporarily from other areas

Community Togetherness

Encourage community events that emphasize resiliency and togetherness

Examples include vigils (limited), faith, family/supports, thinking about reasons to feel thankful, building something together to represent community resiliency

Although basic, food can be a way to bring people together and can be a way to show you care

Student-Led Community Efforts

Especially in high schools, ask students to come together and lead efforts to help the community heal.

High schoolers can be particularly good at identifying others who may be feeling vulnerable. They can also be good at identifying those who are having thoughts of revenge or potentially “copycat” individuals.

QUESTIONS???