Talking to Kids About School Safety

School violence and the resulting intense media coverage bring school safety issues to the forefront for all of us. However, children, in particular, may experience anxiety, fear, and a sense of personal risk. Knowing how to talk with your child about school safety issues could be critical in recognizing and preventing acts of violence, and will play an important role in easing fear and anxieties about their personal safety. To guide parents through discussions about school violence, Mental Health America offers the following suggestions:

1. **Encourage children to talk about their concerns and express their feelings.** Some children may be hesitant to initiate such conversation, so you may want to prompt them by asking if they feel safe at school. When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term "violence" but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them.

2. **Talk honestly about your own feelings regarding school violence.** It is important for children to recognize they are not dealing with their fears alone.

3. **Validate the child's feelings.** Do not minimize a child's concerns. Let him/her know that serious school violence is not common, which is why incidents such as Columbine and Conyers, Georgia, attract so much media attention. Stress that schools are safe places. In fact, recent studies have shown that schools are more secure now than ever before.

4. **Empower children to take action regarding school safety.** Encourage them to report specific incidents (such as bullying, threats or talk of suicide) and to develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Encourage older children to actively participate in student-run anti-violence programs.

5. **Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your child's school.** Explain why visitors sign in at the principal's office or certain doors remain locked during the school day. Help your child understand that such precautions are in place to ensure his or her safety and stress the importance of adhering to school rules and policies.

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Create safety plans with your child.
Help identify which adults (a friendly secretary, trusted teacher or approachable administrator) your child can talk to if they feel threatened at school. Also ensure that your child knows how to reach you (or another family member or friend) in case of crisis during the school day. Remind your child that they can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.

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Recognize behavior that may indicate your child is concerned about returning to school.
Younger children may react to school violence by not wanting to attend school or participate in school-based activities. Teens and adolescents may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.

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Keep the dialogue going.
Make school safety a common topic in family discussions rather than just a response to an immediate crisis. Open dialogue will encourage children to share their concerns.

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Seek help when necessary.
If you are worried about a child's reaction or have ongoing concerns about his/her behavior or emotions, contact a mental health professional at school or at your community mental health center. Your local Mental Health Association or the National Mental Health Association's Information Center can direct you to resources in your community.

The Following Behaviors Are Signs That a Child May Need Help

- Lack of interest or poor performance in school
- Absence of age-appropriate anger control skills
- Seeing self as always the victim
- Persistent disregard for or refusal to follow rules
- Cruelty to pets or other animals
- Artwork or writing that is bleak or violent or that depicts isolation or anger
- Talking constantly about weapons or violence
- Obsession with violent games and/or TV shows
- Lack of enthusiasm, energy or motivation
- Carrying a weapon to school
- Overreacting to criticism
- Restlessness and agitation
- Bullying
- Misplaced or unwarranted jealousy
- Involvement with or interest in gangs
- Withdrawal from friends and activities