

## Teacher Guidelines for Helping Youth in the Aftermath of the Shooting in the Amish School

Families in the surrounding communities after these kinds of events will have been impacted on many different levels. These guidelines were developed for those districts close to the event, however many across the United States will find some parts of these guidelines helpful in addressing fears and anxieties in their schools. Because this was in a particularly bucolic setting, perpetrated against an innocent community that chooses to self-isolate from the violence of mainstream America, this even is particularly bothersome for many. Although some of this seems obvious, give consideration to each of these points:

**Routine** gives us a sense of security. Having something like this occur anywhere is terrible. Having it occur in one's own neighborhood is at least frightening and for some, terrifying. Children and youth may feel they've lost all sense of security. The world may not feel like a safe place for some time. In fact, ways that life seemed safe in a way that was taken for granted may, for some, be forever changed. A part of the recovery process will be searching for the "new normal." Keep routines and, if possible, give students warning when a change needs to occur.

**For children who are anxious, it might help to** create time when adults check in with students. It can be quite informal or quite structured. This could be a teacher making sure s/he checks in with a student informally ("You mentioned you were having nightmares last week. How are you sleeping?") or more formally (having students journal for a few minutes each day and mentioning to them that this is one way for them to keep you knowing how they're doing). For parents, being intentional about checking in before bedtime each evening is very helpful, even if the child isn't asked anything directly related to this incident. Having your parent sit on the edge of your bed for a few minutes is very reassuring.... talking about gratitude for something or reading together; if the family is one of faith, having prayer time together, maybe talking about one thing they look forward to. Give children as much warning as possible (if you're able to know) when another change is about to happen or when their routine will be interrupted.

**Night terrors, nightmares, flashbacks** and other disconcerting re-visiting of the trauma are common. If children want to sleep close to parents for awhile, that's fine. Bring a sleeping bag into the parent's bedroom for a few nights. If that kind of anxiety lasts for a long time, "help" children back into their rooms by moving slowly further away, and then shifting to parents staying with children until they fall asleep (but being honest that the parent is going to sleep in his/her own bed). For a short time, indulge children in ways that help them feel safe enough to sleep.

**Help them anticipate triggers.** Talk ahead of time about how it is that when you've been through a frightening event, and that some things like sirens or loud noises might bring up intense fear. Talk with them about the importance of telling adults when they have fears, and reassure them that you're always willing to listen.

**Self-soothing** varies from child to child, so try to help children come up with ideas about how they can help themselves feel better when they begin to worry. Children often think they're the only ones worrying about certain things. Provide opportunities for groups of children to talk about things that work for them in order to both give each other ideas and also to validate that "I'm not the only one worrying." It normalizes for them that worry is not unusual.



**Resist the impulse to always have an answer.** We often feel that we need to have an answer or to take away the pain... to give hope when there is fear. Sometimes this is our own discomfort in seeing children suffer. Often the best answer is to reassure children that you don't know how it will all turn out OK, but that you know that the way we get through difficult times is to do it together. Kids and parents, kids and teachers, kids and their friends, that this is a time for us to all be there for each other.

**Tell students basic facts, and ask what they'd like to understand** rather than giving them too much information. Sometimes we feed them fears by trying to reassure them about something that they weren't fearful of until we mentioned it. **Think through the questions they might ask that will be challenging** so you have an answer at the ready. An example of this is a graceful and honest answer that staff near the shooting decided to use if younger children asked what it meant that the children were shot "execution style," which is what the media continues to emphasize. Their response to children will be "That means that it was intentional. He meant to do it." This is a wonderful example of the value of thinking ahead of time to the questions you most dread. Telling children that you don't know what that means or that they don't need to know graphic details gives them the message that we don't respect their integrity or that we're afraid of telling them the truth. This often stimulates further speculation and fascination with that detail or question. This answer (that it was intentional) holds great integrity because it is truthful, but it doesn't further traumatize the students, giving them something terrible to imagine.

Another helpful strategy to help kids talk is to **give them a full "step" of distance** from the question, making it impersonal to them. As an example of this, instead of asking, "What are your greatest fears?" instead, ask, "What do you think kids your age are most concerned about right now?" or "What do you think teachers could do to help the kids who came here feel like they belong? Like they feel safe? Like we can all get along here?" By doing this, children can talk about their fears without feeling so vulnerable, because they are framing it as though they're speaking for others. **And my favorite question for students....** "What do you most wish adults understood about what it is like for you right now?"

**Entertainment and diversion** are helpful. It is really important to have breaks from the grieving, the worry, the event. Have fun assemblies, field trips, excitement -- and encourage parents to do so as well.

**Often emotions are so overwhelming that staying more in the cognitive realm is helpful.** As counselors, care-givers and parents, we often think that helping children put words to their emotions is the way to go. But when we think about the emotions that the Amish might have, those emotions defy description. To ask about emotions and feelings often takes people back into again feeling terribly vulnerable. Try asking questions that keep them in a more cognitive place, such as questions about what they think instead of what they feel, what anyone can do now that will help, how you can help them plan how to feel safer. The cognitive act of making lists is a left-brain activity. When we help people activate the left brain, they often feel less overwhelmed. When people are first coming out of shock and are at their most vulnerable, staying more cognitive may help them gain more stability. In time, it may then be helpful to go back and re-visit the emotions. For most of them, it is too soon for traditional therapies.

**Much can't be put into words** so using art with children is effective in many ways. Give some opportunities for children to draw whatever they want, but also help them draw pictures of things for which they are grateful, things that help them cope, things they look forward to, and their vision of what life might look like some day when they've grown up. Art is helpful for all ages.

**Be careful about using the word "normal" when referring to the future.** When we talk about "regular" life, it would be easy to say "when life is normal." But what we know is that, for many, it will be a new normal, not their picture of what normal used to be. It might be more helpful to talk about the very distant future some of the time.

**Reassure children and parents** that, although they may be unable to feel hope for the future, that you hold hope that they will adjust in ways they can't begin to imagine yet. The human spirit has remarkable resiliency. Sometimes all that gets us through these times is the realization that others have survived horrific times and have gone on to eventually find great joy in their "new normal."

Being able to **connect with loved ones** is the most important and basic need children have. You may have students who need to call home and check in with parents every now and again. That's difficult to predict at this point, but be indulgent in those requests for a couple of weeks.

Most important: **Children will do as well as the adults around them.** It is important for us to stress self-care for adults. If we don't take good care of ourselves, we won't be able to care for the children. Some of the best support you can provide for children is anything that will help their parents and caregivers to adjust or feel better. And this also goes for all who are working in response to this event. Self-care for all of us is crucial, as difficult as that may be.

Also, it will be really important to help parents have trust in the school and how you provide for safety. The biggest single most important thing you might do is hold parent meetings, even if very few attend. It sends the message that you're willing to meet, you're open to hearing their concerns, you want to work together to be sure that everyone is on board with making the community the safest it can be.

Also, very important... your message should continue to remind everyone that violence is not specifically a school problem. It is a cultural and societal problem. At this time and at all times, you are depending on your community, on the faith community, the business community and especially your parents to work together with you on creating a safe community for your children. Schools don't create this violence. True, bullying is a huge issue and destroys some children's social connection to others -- they lose their sense of compassion and empathy. But kids learn about violence on video games, on television, on the internet, because of abuse in some homes and from many other influences as well. Keep broadening people's image of violence from being school shootings to acknowledging that this is violence that has been bred by the shortcomings of our cultural and society. We want the whole community to "own" the problem. Schools can't create safe communities by themselves. This should also be a consistent message to media.