

Talking With Students About the Amish School Shooting Guidelines for teachers

*There are separate guidelines for teachers in South Lancaster County ~
Email us at <info@cmionline.org> if this tragedy is geographically close to you.*

Although school shootings are covered every year by the media, something about the shooting in the Amish School has captured our attention and brought fears to the surface that haven't been felt in this way since the shooting at Columbine. Most likely the fact that this was visited upon a culture that works diligently to leave peacefully and to isolate from influences of violence contributes to this event garnering such focus. Because it occurred in such a bucolic place among such innocent people, there are likely children who are more bothered by this event than some in the recent past.

It is helpful for us to use these events as times to check in with children about their fears, and to use the "teachable moment" for concepts of empathy, tolerance and acceptance.

Also, remember that just because kids aren't bringing it up to adults doesn't mean they aren't worried or that they aren't talking about it among themselves. It may be that you decide not to bring it up to students, but realize the need to be prepared to address it if students bring the subject up. The following is a suggested approach for leading classroom discussions. Gear language to fit the developmental stage of your students.

- Begin with an opening statement that just makes an observation of what happened: "What happened yesterday at the Amish School is frightening. We know that when these things happen, even if kids don't tell us about their thoughts and reactions, many are thinking or wondering or worrying about it."
- Now normalize children's reactions. "When things like this happen, it can be frightening even though it is a long way from here. Some of us might have fears we never had before. Sometimes we have difficulty sleeping. Some of us might hear a loud noise now and wonder if it is something threatening. Some of us might not feel any of this at all, and might instead feel anger at the man who did this, or sadness for the families, but not fear. These are just some of the many kinds of reactions we have when scary things happen." You might respond with, "It isn't unusual for people to have these kinds of feelings when something like this happens." "I bet others have similar kinds of reactions as well." Remember, some students won't be having thoughts or fears about this -- they just haven't connected to this event. So we don't want them to feel badly that they didn't already feel bad! There will be a wide range of reactions.
- Now help students begin to put their own words to this. Using their own words actually is very helpful in beginning to master fears. For that reason, the kinds of reassurance that we usually use is not particularly empowering to the students. What is more empowering is for them to be able to name their fears and be coached to figure out some of their own coping strategies... to be able to tell school people their concerns and be able to have school staff do problem-solving with them. *Just telling students they don't need to worry doesn't make them stop worrying! Straight reassurance doesn't usually change how they feel inside. They need to go through more of a process. So the*



next questions might be, "Some of us thought about this last night, and each of us had some thoughts and worries that were similar and we each probably had some that were different. Let's listen to each other and find out how our thoughts and worries were similar and how they were different." And let kids begin to talk about their fears. Instead of telling them that their fears are unfounded ("But that wouldn't happen...") take time to nod and say that you can understand why that might be a fear. That isn't validating that it will happen, you are just letting the student know that you're really listening and that you believe what the student is saying to you.

- As you listen to students, when one tells of a fear that is school-specific, write it down! Tell students that you want to make sure that the principal knows all of the concerns that students have so s/he can be certain that you are doing all you can to keep the school and the children safe. This gesture of writing down the list of school-based concerns sends a very clear message to students that you are taking their concerns seriously. It may help to ask students whether they have suggestions for the principal.
- As children share fears, ask the group what ideas they have for helping solve problems or for coping or handling fears. Help empower students to feel a sense of mastery in any way possible. Generate a long list of "when I feel ___ I ___ to feel better."
- When it seems like this part of the discussion is winding down, there is a choice. This is a time that students could choose to do something charitable or compassionate related to this event, like send a card to the Amish community or raise money for a donation. Being able to *do* something is often a great way of processing an event. Or, move to summarizing and setting the stage for continued discussion. "It sounds like lots of us had similar fears and lots of us had some that were unique (or different). Fears and concerns change over time, so it won't always be like this. But we want to keep hearing from you and finding out what we can do at school to help everyone feel the safest we can. So don't wait for me to bring this up. If something is on your mind about this, let me know." If you do some kind of activity, still end each time with this summarizing.

Find opportunities to address this event and the resulting issues again for as long as it might be an issue for any student.

So the short guide for this discussion is:

1. Statement of observation (This was frightening for some of us.)
2. Normalize reactions (We have lots of kinds of reactions, some similar and some different from our peers.)
3. Encourage students to put their own words to their fears, remembering that it isn't necessarily helpful to jump to reassurance, but rather to validate their concerns - the reassurance is that the school wants to do all it can to help create safety
4. Write down all concerns that are school-based, assuring students that the principal wants to know what they think and what will help. Encourage their ideas.
5. Possibly take action and the class can do something. Summarize the discussion and leave the door open for future discussion.

*Visit our web site for additional free downloads - home page, lower right hand corner.
Check out the Guidelines for Parents on the Amish school shooting for additional ideas.*

