



**NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

## **GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE MEDIA COVERAGE OF ANNIVERSARY OF SCHOOL TRAGEDIES**

Circumspection and care are critical for the responsible media coverage of the anniversary of any high profile tragedy. This is especially important when covering the impact on children and youth who are less able than adults to understand their continued emotional and psychological reactions to the tragedy. The “anniversary effect” can cause the resurfacing of powerful emotions, particularly for individuals personally connected to the events. While the media can play an important role in providing information about how children in a particular community are coping, it can also cause real harm if its focus magnifies painful, disturbing details, or people’s loss and suffering. Instead, interviews and media coverage should focus on the healing process that is taking place.

### **DANGERS OF INTRUSIVE OR EXCESSIVE COVERAGE**

There are many dangers in emphasizing or repeatedly recounting details of a tragedy like a school shooting or a terrorist attack, particularly in cases involving personal loss or suffering of children. Among them are:

- Intensive, detailed coverage of the event can raise children’s anxiety levels. Troubled youth and those directly impacted by the tragedy may internalize the information and be at renewed risk of severe trauma reactions, such as problems at home or school, extreme anger, aggression, depression, suicide, substance abuse, or the impulse to harm others.
- Forcing children or youth to comment on their loss or re-live their experience can cause serious psychological setbacks. Children are particularly vulnerable and may assume an enormous sense of guilt if they feel that they have said or done something inadequate during a media interview.
- Asking students to comment on a situation they do not fully understand can put them in a position where they feel compelled to make observations or statements that are not accurate or even personally held.
- Excessive or intrusive media coverage can impede the ability of individual students and the school community to move forward with the healing process. Inappropriate coverage of memorial activities can undermine the purpose or healing value of the activity.
- Focusing on the fear and trauma caused by a traumatic and/or violent event perpetuates the misperception that children are not coping. In fact, in most cases, the opposite is true and emphasizing this image can unnecessarily raise children’s threat perception.

### **GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL, RESPONSIBLE COVERAGE**

The following recommendations can help journalists prevent the potential unintended consequences of inappropriate media coverage of anniversary of a tragedy involving children and schools..

**1. To ensure useful, reasonable public information, journalists should:**

- Avoid the impulse to titillate or speculate.
- Report information only from identified official spokespeople.
- Stick to fully verified information that won't hamper recovery efforts.
- Respect the potentially still fragile state of individuals who were near or lost a loved-one.
- Understand the range of potential reactions that can be caused by the anniversary effect.
- Know the school/district's plan for handling the anniversary, including any memorial activities.
- Identify and provide information regarding where to access resources on coping with the anniversary affect and who to contact if someone is having difficulty.

**2. To prevent harm when reporting about the anniversary, journalists should establish policies and procedures that:**

- Coordinate with school officials and relevant community authorities about how and where media people can have access to school events and/or students, staff and families.
- Respect the wishes of the school community for privacy and the protection of students' well-being.
- Require parental consent for youth interviews.
- Permit youth interviews to be conducted **only** when a parent or professional mental health professional is present.
- Inform victims and their families of sensitive reports that are about to be made in advance of their release.

**3. To prevent overreaction regarding the anniversary, journalists should:**

- Avoid over dramatizing the impact of initial event or the anniversary on children and youth. Report how they are coping today factually.
- Maintain a balanced level of coverage rather than permitting focus on an event to over-saturate, desensitize, or create a pathological circus atmosphere.
- Emphasize the steps that the school and families have taken to move toward healing, as well as the ongoing school-based prevention and intervention programs that support children's coping skills.
- Require extensive verification of facts through multiple official sources in order to prevent inaccurate, fabricated, or exaggerated information from being released.
- Seek out and consult legitimate experts skilled in providing crisis intervention services to students and knowledgeable on how schools function.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

NASP has developed tips for teachers, parents, and adolescents on issues such as school safety, violence prevention, crisis, positive school climate, and mental health. These are available on our website at For additional information or interviews, contact NASP Director of Marketing and Communications, Kathy Cowan at (301) 657-0270, ext. 226, by e-mail at [kcowan@naspweb.org](mailto:kcowan@naspweb.org).