NASP Urges Support for Psychological Safety in Schools, Calls for Action to Reduce Gun Violence

Bethesda, MD—On behalf of our 25,000 members, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) joins millions of others around the world in expressing our profound grief and anger that, yet again, we are responding to another senseless school shooting. Our heartfelt condolences and deepest hope for strength are with all those who have lost loved ones and the entire Ulvade community. We acknowledge that expressions of support are inadequate in instances of such devastating loss and that continued inaction to prevent gun violence is inexcusable. Incidents of gun violence in our schools and communities and the racially motivated shootings in Buffalo just last week are far too common in the United States, and we need to act now as a nation to address the underlying causes.

The impact of this horrific tragedy is being felt in communities across the country—and at a time when so many people already are experiencing grief and increased stress from other traumatic events. In the coming days and weeks, supporting the psychological safety of our communities, including those not directly affected by the violence, must be prioritized. Most children and youth are resilient and will cope well with the support and care of their families, teachers, friends, and other caring adults. Adult reactions to a tragedy can shape the way children react and their perceptions of safety.

Specific guidance for talking with children about violence can be found here. This resource is available in multiple languages.

It is important to reassure children of their safety in their schools. Doing so may feel difficult in this moment, but schools are, in fact, generally very safe places. Communication and collaboration among schools, parents, and communities are essential to ensuring that our students continue to view schools as safe, caring, and supportive environments. It is also critical that adults watch for signs of distress in students and in other adults and that they seek the support of a mental health professional (e.g., school psychologist, school counselor, community service provider) when necessary.

Spring is a time of increased stress and anxiety for students in normal times. These feelings may be compounded by other recent tragedies, added stress from 2 years of pandemic, concern over deep divisions within the country, and the anniversary effect of other acts of violence, such as the murder of George Floyd. These cumulative stressors can create intense feelings and reactions in children and adults. The intensity and nature of reactions will vary depending on an individual’s personal history and relationship to this or a similar tragedy. Be mindful of students’ potential reactions. Although many students will exhibit little to no change in emotion or behavior, some will reexperience feelings of sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, or grief. Related symptoms may include disruptive behavior, reduced concentration, heightened volatility or sensitivity, and withdrawal. In most cases, symptoms will subside with adult reassurance and support. Some students may demonstrate intense, persistent reactions that warrant professional mental health intervention. Students at greatest risk are those who witnessed an act of violence, experienced a traumatic event, lost a loved one, or have mental health issues. Refer these students to appropriate school or community mental health professionals.
Importantly, many adults are under extreme stress as well, especially those working in schools and other caregiving roles. Educators need adequate support and resources to meet the needs of their students and community. All adults must attend to their own reactions to a traumatic event and seek assistance when needed to appropriately support the children in their care.

Families and educators can support children’s sense of safety in the following ways.

- Offer a developmentally appropriate, clear, and straightforward explanation of the event.
- Validate children’s feelings and letting them know it is ok to feel angry, sad, or upset.
- Be a good listener and observer.
- Provide various ways for children to express emotions, such as journaling, writing letters, talking, drawing, making a collage, or playing music.
- Monitor students’ social media use. Social media is the primary method of communication for some young people, and it can have the potential for triggering or exacerbating crises, causing fear and panic, and creating crisis contagion.
- Focus on resiliency and the compassion of others.

Schools can support students’ sense of safety in the following ways.

- Return to normalcy and routine to the greatest extent possible, making classrooms predictable and welcoming, while maintaining flexibility.
- Provide access to mental health supports, as needed.
- Connect families with other available resources after school hours.

Families are encouraged to support each other in the following ways.

- Spend time together.
- Validate children’s feelings.
- Ask for help, as needed, and find calm and relaxing activities to do at home.
- Limit children’s exposure to media coverage, particularly for young children. If children are watching the news or accessing information online, parents and caregivers should be available to talk to their children about it.


As with any crisis event, the immediate focus should be on supporting the physical and psychological safety of yourselves and your loved ones and on helping children process this tragedy. However, we must not be distracted from the critical need to address the underlying causes of violence in this country. The United States is the only country that continues to experience this type of gun violence, and it continues to avoid meaningful action to stop it. We must come together to improve access to comprehensive mental and behavioral health services, both in schools and our communities, and to implement commonsense gun safety legislation. Our children’s lives literally depend on it.

For additional information on school safety and crisis response, and the role of school psychologists in supporting academic and life success of our nation’s youth, visit www.nasponline.org or contact NASP Director of Communications, Kathy Cowan at kcowan@naspweb.org.

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