

After The Shooting: What Educators Can Do for Children and Adolescents

Children and teens will react differently to the traumatic and horrific event at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Some will seem to come through the experience unscathed. Later, some may begin to have delayed reactions. Others will react strongly from the start, even though they may have suffered little loss or any sense of threat. However, most children and teens have normal and typical reactions to these abnormal circumstances.

Common Reactions

Some of the common reactions you can expect to see are:

- A need to talk about the shooting.

Young people will repeat stories regarding this event many times. Even shy children may open up to strangers about what they saw on television, heard from others, and felt about the victims. Many will worry about what happened to others and will ask many questions.

- Sleep problems.

The nighttime can seem especially threatening. Many may be afraid to go to sleep and will be unable to sleep through the night. They may have nightmares.

- Separation anxiety.

Some young people will be afraid of being left alone anywhere, even if it's only in another room at home. They may want to sleep with their parents at night. They may be afraid of leaving home to attend school and seek reassurance from their parents.

- Worries and fears.

Most will be much more vigilant about the possible dangers in our community. They may become apprehensive on everyday trips and in doing typical errands. And if they perceive any threat or hint of aggression, they may immediately believe that another shooting is on the way.

- Vivid memories of the shooting.

Many young people will picture in their minds detailed and powerful scenes from televised reports of the shooting. It's almost as if they have their own internal videotape that replays their experiences whenever a "trigger" reminds them of the shooting. They may write poetry or draw pictures of the scene. Young children may act out the event in their play.

- Hyperactivity.

Most adults will have a strong need to take some action after a shooting. Young people will react similarly. They will become more active, will have difficulty paying attention, and may be more impulsive.

- Emotional sensitivity or numbness.

Many young people will become much more sensitive. They will become upset easily and become angry quickly. But others may seem to become numb or unfeeling. They may not show any sadness or anger, but they also may not show any joy either. It's as if they are closing themselves off from any future hurt or threat.

- Physical complaints.

They may complain more of headaches, stomach aches, nausea, and fatigue.

How You Can Help

As teachers, your goals are to help students to learn from their experiences, even those involving violence. This is an opportunity connect to recreate a sense of security and to help them handle

the stress that can interfere with them doing schoolwork and availability to learn and grow in their relationships. Here are some suggestions to achieve those goals:

- Give your students time to deal with these experiences. Naturally, you may be feeling reluctant to miss instructional time. But if you set aside times for students to describe their experiences and to discuss the shooting's aftermath, they will be better able to turn to the work at hand. Of course, talking is only one of the ways to work through these reactions. Other ways are writing about the events and, especially for young children, playing, drawing pictures, or using puppets or toys to act out their experiences.
- Be especially calm, show your concern and emphasize the positive by offering appropriate reassurances and reminders of their safety. By your manner, you will be setting a powerful example of how students can manage their reactions in a productive way.
- Remind them that these reactions are natural. Many young people, like adults, will believe that something is wrong with themselves for feeling the way they do. They will need reassurance that their feelings are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Finding out that their fellow students are having some of the same reactions also can be a great relief.
- Control rumors and correct any myths they may have. During crises, there is an information vacuum. People often fill it by passing along rumors. You can help to control rumors and reduce overreactions by stopping "tall tales" and giving students the facts. Also, students may have some mistaken ideas about reactions to crises. You may need to point out that people rarely panic. Most show initiative, courage, and willingness to help others.
- Give them an opportunity to help. Many of our students, fortunately, have been spared from direct involvement in this incident. You may encourage these students to offer help to others in need in their local community. For example, they may want to donate toys to the domestic violence shelter or send a message of compassion to the victims.
- Identify students who may be suffering severe post-traumatic stress. Students who had serious losses, such as the death of a loved one, may need more help. Students who also need more help are those having extreme reactions to the shooting, such as repeated nightmares, "flashbacks" to scenes of the shooting, crying spells, behavior problems, and strong phobic reactions.