Promoting Compassion and Acceptance in Crisis

A natural reaction to acts of extreme violence, like school shootings, rioting, and terrorist attacks, is the desire to lash out and punish the perpetrators or perceived enemy. People who are angry or frightened often feel the ability to "fight back" puts them more in control or that it will alleviate their sense of outrage. While anger is a normal response felt by many, we must ensure we do not compound an already tragic situation and react against innocent individuals with vengeance and hate. There is a tremendous risk of unfairly stigmatizing people who are perceived to resemble the perpetrators because of their apparent race, language, religion, or the way they dress.

Children, in particular, may have difficulty channeling their feelings appropriately and they can easily pick up negative or demeaning cues given by adults around them. Given the diversity of America's schools, some students may become targets of hostility and blame. Bullying and harassment are *never* acceptable but they can be especially damaging when certain students or segments of society feel especially vulnerable. Parents and school personnel need to be prepared to prevent and to intervene quickly and effectively in the presence of abusive behaviors toward *any* students. Such behaviors can only further contribute to the risk of violence in schools and communities.

Adults can help children understand the importance of treating all people with dignity and not judging entire *groups* of people for the actions of a few. ***Most importantly, adults must model compassion and acceptance of differences in their words and behavior.*** They should also encourage children to explore their feelings about prejudice and hate. Doing so is not only critical to preventing further harm, but the process presents a potentially powerful opportunity for our young people to learn and incorporate into their values the true strength of our country—our commitment to individual freedom and upholding the respect and dignity of all people.

Key Messages

1. ***Violence and hate are never solutions to anger***. Perpetrators of violence—against fellow students or against our country—cause tremendous harm because they act violently against innocent people out of blind hate. We must not act like them by lashing out at innocent people around us, or "hating" them because of their origins, their appearance, or their mode of dress.
2. ***Groups of people should not be judged by the actions of a few***. It is wrong to condemn an entire group of people by association of religion, race, homeland, affiliations, or even proximity. No one likes to be blamed or threatened for the actions of others.
3. ***America is strong because of its diversity.*** American democracy is founded on respect for individual differences. Those differences in culture, religion, ideas, ethnicity, and other forms of identity have contributed to the strength and richness of our country.

4. ***All people deserve to be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity.*** Certainly, individuals proven to be guilty of a crime should be punished. No matter how angry we are over these terrible crimes, our Constitution ensures fair and equitable treatment under the law for all Americans.
5. ***Vengeance and justice are not necessarily the same.*** Justice means punishing the real perpetrators, not innocent people. Hurting other children and neighbors will not make us safer, stop terrorists, or help punish students who harm or harass classmates. It will only add to the hate and anger, increasing the risk of further violence.
6. ***We are in this together.*** People of all ethnicities are hurt by terrorism and other acts of senseless violence. We need to support each other, comfort each other, and work together to help those most in need during difficult times.
7. ***History shows us hate only causes harm.*** Some of our country's darkest moments resulted from prejudice and hate for our own people because individuals acted out of fear. We must not repeat terrible mistakes such as our inappropriate, often violent treatment and ignorance of persons of minority groups.
8. ***We need to work for peace in our communities and around the world.*** By reaching out to our classmates, friends, and neighbors from diverse backgrounds, we can help heal the wounds from tragic events and build stronger, more resilient communities.
9. ***Acceptance is a lifelong endeavor.*** Although it is critical in the immediate aftermath of a crisis to protect classmates and neighbors from harassment, the issues of acceptance and inclusion go beyond crisis recovery. We must embrace these values for all time. This includes all races, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and those with special needs.

Tips for Parents and Teachers

1. ***Model compassion and acceptance of differences.*** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid making negative statements about any racial, ethnic, or religious group. Reach out to your neighbors and colleagues who might feel at risk because of their ethnicity, religion or other traits.
2. ***Provide useful information.*** Accurate information about people, events, reactions, and feelings is empowering. Use language that is developmentally appropriate for children. Make sure all information is factually true. This is especially important when news reports have negative statements about any specific group.
3. ***Avoid stereotyping people or countries.*** Children can easily generalize negative statements to students in their classes and community. Focusing on the nationality of terrorists or the affiliations or appearance of other perpetrators of violence can create prejudice, anger, and mistrust for innocent groups of people. Be clear about your statements and biases, and help children understand their own prejudices.
4. ***Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately.*** Make it clear that such behavior, in any form (in person, online, social media) is unacceptable. Talk to the children involved about the

reasons for their behavior. Offer alternative methods of expressing their anger, confusion, or insecurity.

5. ***Address the issue of blame factually.*** Explore who and what may be to blame for this event. Use non-speculative terms. Do not suggest any group is responsible. Do not repeat the speculations of others, including newscasters. Do not encourage or allow random blaming; but understand that self–blame may be a way for students to feel "in control" (something different they "could have done" or "could do" in the future). Be careful to ensure students from targeted groups do not assume blame in order to make classmates feel better. Blaming can be especially tempting in case of acts of random but intentional violence because someone is at fault. However, explain that the actions of a few individuals cannot be blamed on any racial or ethnic group. Help children resist the tendency to want to "pin the blame" on someone close by. In this country, we still believe that all people are innocent until solid, reliable evidence from our legal authorities proves otherwise.

6. ***Discuss how it would feel to be blamed unfairly by association.*** Ask children if they have ever gotten in trouble for something a sibling or friend did and how they felt. Would they like it if their entire class were punished for the actions of one student and if they think this would be fair? Older children might want to consider what would have happened if all white American males had been condemned for the Oklahoma City bombing.

7. ***Explore children's fears***. Even children who can describe what happened may not be able to express fears, questions, or describe assumptions or conclusions they may have made. Use activities, role-playing, and discussions to explore their fears about the events and their feelings about various groups from diverse cultures or lifestyles.

8. ***Emphasize positive, familiar images of diverse groups***. Identify people of diverse ethnicities, religions and/or lifestyles that children know and who have a positive place in their lives. These could be neighbors, friends, school personnel, health care professionals, members of their faith community, or local merchants. Discuss the many characteristics, values, and experiences the children have in common with these people.

9. ***Identify "heroes" of varying backgrounds involved in response to traumatic events.*** These include firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, military personnel, public officials, medical workers, teachers, faith leaders, public figures, and regular citizens who work to help keep students, families, schools, and communities safe.

10. ***Undertake projects to help those in need with people from diverse backgrounds.*** Helping others is part of the healing process. Working with classmates or members of the community who come from different backgrounds not only enables children to feel that they are making a positive contribution, it also reinforces their sense of commonality with diverse people.

11. ***Discuss historical instances of American prejudice***. Internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor and the backlash against Arab Americans during the Gulf War are obvious examples. Teachers can do lessons in class, but parents can also discuss the consequences of these events and encourage their children to suggest better choices that Americans can make this time.

12. ***Learn about the diverse communities and faiths represented in your area***. Knowledge debunks myths about other people and can humanize other cultures. In school, have children share information about their family or cultural customs to reinforce the notion that all people have special beliefs and rituals.
13. ***Read books with your children or students that address prejudice and hate.*** There are many, many stories appropriate for varying age groups that can help children think about and define their feelings regarding these issues. The school or local librarian can make recommendations.

Additional Tips for Schools

1. ***Provide families with information.*** Send home materials on class lessons, book titles, resources for further information, and opportunities to help. Enlist support from parents to prevent teasing, bullying, or abuse of *any* students. Consider implementation of one of the proven bullying prevention curricula, such as "Bully-Proof Your School."
2. ***Train* all *school personnel***. Every school professional should be trained to model compassion and acceptance of differences. They should also intervene immediately if a child is being bullied. This includes bus drivers, lunchroom and playground monitors, after school program leaders, coaches and extracurricular activities directors.
3. ***Share information with community groups***. Provide talking points, information, and intervention strategies to local community organizations dealing with children. This can include local libraries, youth programs, recreational facilities, and the media.

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Related Resources

School Violence Prevention: Tips for Parents and Educators [/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-prevention/school-violence-prevention-tips-for-parents-and-educators]
All schools work to prevent school violence and schools are very safe places. Students, staff, and parents all have an important role in promoting school safety.

School Violence Prevention: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams [/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-prevention/school-violence-prevention-guidelines-for-administrators-and-crisis-teams]
School administrators and crisis team members can create safe, secure, and peaceful schools free from the destructive influence of violence in all of its forms.

Responding to School Violence: Tips for Administrators [/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-prevention/responding-to-school-violence-tips-for-administrators]
Administrators can reinforce the importance of creating a caring school community in which adults and students respect and trust each other and all students feel connected, understand expectations, and receive the behavioral and mental health support they need.

View All Crisis Resources [http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis]

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