

October 24, 2022

Dear WPS Families:

There are reports in the media today of another school shooting, this time in a high school St. Louis. Though details surrounding the event are at this point unclear, the news reports indicate that two victims were killed and at least seven others were injured.

As I said in my letter to families last May after the shooting in Uvalde, TX, though there are terrible acts of violence in our country each day, as Superintendent, I feel a particular obligation to acknowledge incidents of violence in schools. Every time I do so, I hope that it will be the last time that it is necessary. It goes without saying that our students and staff deserve to go to school each day without fear.

In Westwood, we have many protocols in place to keep our schools safe. In 2019, the District commissioned a comprehensive security audit of our schools. Since that time, we have worked to implement the recommendations, both around security infrastructure (e.g. security cameras, improved locks, duress buttons) and emergency protocols. Last spring, the District hired a Director of Safety and Security, Steve Trask, to ensure that these measures are continually reviewed, revised, and implemented in a manner that reflects current best practice. This fall, the District provided training to all of our staff and we have resumed practice drills with students that had been set aside during the pandemic.

While these measures are important, it is also essential that we foster a school climate in which every student feels a sense of belonging, is known as an individual, and has a trusted adult they can go to if they need help or are worried about a friend. We must continue to make sure that everyone feels they are a part of our community and that they have a responsibility to the community.

According to the CDC, firearms are now the leading cause of death for American children and teens. Next month the Westwood Public Schools, Westwood Youth and Family Services, and the Westwood Police Department are co-sponsoring a community event called [Be SMART](#) in collaboration with Everytown for Gun Safety. The program will focus on the safe storage of guns and helping parents normalize conversations about gun safety. The event will be held on **November 16th from 7:00 pm - 8:15 pm** in the Wentworth Hall community room (273 Washington St).

Finally, students are impacted differently when they hear the news of school shootings. Some students may be fearful or worried about whether their school is a safe place. Other students may be reminded of another violent episode or tragedy from their own past experience. Students of different ages may have different understandings of this news and may respond or express their concerns differently. I have attached some resources from the National Association of School Psychologists that may provide some guidance about how to talk with your child about how they are feeling.

If you have specific questions, please feel free to contact Steve Trask, Director of Safety and Security, your building principal, or any member of the District leadership team.

Sincerely,

Emily J. Parks
Superintendent

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT VIOLENCE: TIPS FOR FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

Families and school personnel play a critical role in helping to reestablish a sense of normalcy and security for children after an act of violence occurs. Follow these key reminders and visit www.nasponline.org/children-and-violence to learn more.



REASSURE CHILDREN

- Reassure children you are there to keep them safe.
- Make time for children to talk about and learn to appropriately express their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs and help to put them in perspective.
- Emphasize what schools and caregivers are doing to keep people safe. Point out clear or visible safety efforts whenever possible.
- Explain that, although the possibility of school violence exists, the probability that it will affect us (our school) is very low. Most schools are safe, even though it may not feel that way in the moment.
- Be aware of how your emotions/reactions could contribute to fear/trauma in some children. It's okay to acknowledge your own fear/concern, but prioritize calmness in the presence of children.



MAKE TIME TO TALK

- Be patient and look for clues that a child wants to talk, such as hovering around.
- Let children's questions guide the information provided.
- If a child is fearful/worried/confused, listen and acknowledge (e.g., "This is really hard to understand."). Use statements like "Let's talk about what we are doing at school/home to keep us safe (provide 2-3 visible or clear examples)." This is not a guarantee of safety; rather, it is reassurance adults are doing everything they can to support safety.
- Young children may need concrete activities such as looking at books, while some older children may prefer writing, drawing, or playing music to identify and express their feelings.
- Be mindful of a child's previous traumas or exposure to violence and chronic or systemic stressors in their life.



REVIEW SAFETY PROCEDURES

- Help children identify an adult at school and in the community that they can go to if they feel uncomfortable, threatened, or at risk.
- Review procedures and safeguards in school and at home. Be sure children understand the information.



OBSERVE CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL STATE

- Watch for changes in behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns that can indicate anxiety or stress. Some examples include irritability, nightmares, and stomachaches. These should ease with reassurance and time.
- Seek help from a mental health professional right away if you are concerned about your child hurting themselves or someone else. Also seek help if they have more intense reactions such as excessive fear or anger that lasts more than 2 weeks.
- Limit television viewing and social media that may have disturbing images or graphic references to the event.

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT VIOLENCE: TIPS FOR FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

KEEP EXPLANATIONS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Communications should be tailored to the specific needs, age, and developmental level of each child. Balancing the amount of detail provided with reassurances is important at any age.

Early Elementary

Answer questions simply, without extensive details; balance with reassurances that they and their loved ones are safe and protected.

Upper Elementary and Early Middle School

Provide factual information to correct misinformation. Help them separate reality from fantasy. Invite students to share their thoughts and offer alternatives of expression, such as play acting or drawing.

Upper Middle and High School

Listen to students' ideas and observations about current safety efforts. Emphasize why and how to follow school safety guidelines (e.g., not opening exterior doors), report concerns, and get help. As needed, assist students with safe and prosocial advocacy and involvement.

POINTS TO EMPHASIZE WHEN TALKING TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- What happened is scary and sad, but most schools are quite safe. In our community, school staff are working with families and public safety providers to keep you safe.
- The school building is safe because ... (cite specific school procedures).
- School safety is primarily the responsibility of adults, but we can all play a role. Tell an adult if you see or hear something that concerns you. You may provide important information that can prevent harm.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. Adults work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry. You can always tell ... (provide specific example).
- Stay away from guns and other weapons unless supervised by an adult. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution. Students can be part of antiviolence programs at school, learn conflict mediation skills, and seek help from an adult if they are (or if a peer is) struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

For information about continuing to support children in coping with tragedy, see [Guidance at a Glance: "Helping Children Cope With Tragedy"](#)

Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers

High profile acts of violence, particularly in schools, can confuse and frighten children who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved-ones are at risk. They will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security and talking with them about their fears.

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
2. **Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.
3. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
 - **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
 - **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
 - **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.
4. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.
5. **Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and

time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

6. **Limit television viewing of these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.
7. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- Schools are safe places. School staff works with parents and public safety providers (local police and fire departments, emergency responders, hospitals, etc.) to keep you safe.
- The school building is safe because ... (cite specific school procedures).
- We all play a role in the school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened.
- There is a difference between reporting, tattling or gossiping. You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the **possibility** of something happening and **probability** that it will affect you (our school community).
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying about the event.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
- Stay away from guns and other weapons. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.

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PROTECTING OUR KIDS IS UP TO ALL OF US

BEING SMART SAVES LIVES

SECURE

all guns in your home and vehicles

MODEL

responsible behavior around guns

ASK

about the presence of unsecured guns in other homes

RECOGNIZE

the role of guns in suicide

TELL

your peers to be SMART

The **Be SMART** framework is designed to help parents and adults normalize conversations about gun safety and take responsible actions that can prevent child gun deaths and injuries.

DID YOU KNOW?

In 2022 alone, there were at least 232 unintentional shootings by children, resulting in 102 deaths and 142 injuries nationally.

JOIN US! Safe Gun Storage November 16, 2022

Westwood Youth & Family Services
Wentworth Hall Community Room
273 Washington St, Westwood

7:00 – 8:15 PM

Visit
BeSMARTforKids.org
to learn more.

When it comes to kids' safety,
we're ALL in this TOGETHER.

Sponsored by Westwood Public Schools,
Westwood Police Department, Westwood Youth &
Family Services, and Everytown for Gun Safety

