



WESTWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Honoring Tradition, Inspiring Excellence, Shaping the Future

EMILY J. PARKS
Superintendent of Schools

May 24, 2022

Dear Westwood Families:

This afternoon there have been reports in the media of a school shooting at an elementary school in Texas. Though information about this distressing incident is still unclear, *The New York Times* is reporting that 14 children and a teacher were killed by an 18-year-old assailant in Uvalde, Texas.

There have been so many acts of violence in our nation over the last couple of years, and I am not able to respond to each one. All of these incidents are terrible, and they all impact our families and communities. With that said, I feel a particular obligation in moments when violence takes place in schools to acknowledge the incident, since schools should be a sanctuary for children. As an educator and a parent, I know that we send our kids to school each day with the expectation that they will be safe, and when we hear about violence in schools, we all face the fear and anxiety of “what if?”

Each instance of violence in schools raises questions about what we can do to keep our students safe. The Westwood Public Schools has many safety measures and protocols in place. In fact, the District recently hired a Director of Safety and Security to oversee the ongoing review and implementation of these efforts. Some of these efforts include:

- At all of our schools, doors are locked during the school day. The front entryway is either visible from the office or can be viewed on a security camera that is monitored by our administrative assistants.
- We have protocols in place for visitors who come to our buildings.
- All classrooms have a telephone, an intercom, or both.
- All of our school offices, and other key locations in our buildings, have emergency alert buttons that can be used to summon help immediately.
- Security cameras are installed strategically throughout the District.
- Staff are trained on emergency protocols and periodically practice evacuations and lockdowns with students.
- Each school and the District has Incident Management Teams that convenes in the event of a school-based emergency and meets periodically to review crisis response plans.
- Each school has a child study team that meets regularly to monitor the well-being of students.
- The District works closely with the Westwood Police Department and Westwood First Department in the development, review, and implementation of emergency procedures.

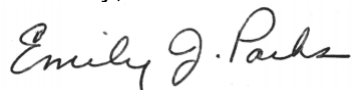
In the Westwood Public Schools, we are also committed to engendering a climate in which respect, inclusion, and care are the norm; in which every student feels a genuine sense of connection to at least one adult in the building; in which students are known as individuals, not one of the crowd; and where students and adults feel a shared sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. This work is essential to the safety of our community and goes hand in hand with the technical safety measures and protocols that we have in place.

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 your child seems to be struggling with the news of this terrible event, we have resources that can help. You can contact our guidance counselors or school psychologists with questions or concerns. All members of our mental health team are available to meet with students in need. In addition, Westwood Youth and Family Services (WYFS) is also a wonderful resource available to all students and their families. WYFS provides free, confidential counseling services to Westwood residents. If you or your child would like to speak with someone at WYFS, please call their office at 781-320-1006.

Please know that the safety of our students and the adults who work with them is our top priority. We are keeping their families and classmates of the victims and the educators who knew and cared for them in our thoughts and prayers in the days ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emily J. Parks". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Emily J. Parks
Superintendent

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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Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents 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.



Reaffirm Safety

Emphasize that schools are very safe. Let children speak about their feelings and validate all reactions to the event. Support the appropriate expression of their feelings and help to put them in perspective.



Make Time to Talk

Let children's questions guide the information provided. Be patient and look for clues that a child wants to talk. Young children may need concrete activities (e.g., imaginative play) and some older children may prefer writing or playing music.



Keep Explanations Developmentally Appropriate

Early Elementary

Provide simple information balanced by assurance of safety.

Upper Elementary & Early Middle

Answer questions and assist in separating reality from fantasy.

Upper Middle & High

Emphasize student role in safety & how to access support.



Review Safety Procedures

Help children identify one adult at school and in the community that they can go to if they feel threatened or at risk. Review procedures and safeguards in school and home settings.



Observe Children's Emotional State

Some will not express themselves verbally but changes in behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns can indicate anxiety or stress. Seek help from a mental health professional for those with more intense reactions.



Maintain a Normal Routine

Keep a regular schedule to assure and promote physical and mental health. Encourage maintenance of school work and extracurricular activities but do not push children if they seem overwhelmed. Limit TV exposure.