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When Mark Lawler, 5, came home from his Guilderland, New York, elementary school one afternoon last year, his mom, Kate, opened his backpack as usual to look for notes from his teacher. She was shocked to find one from the school informing parents that a bomb threat had occurred that day. School officials had assembled the students in the gym while police scoured the school with bomb-sniffing dogs to make sure it was safe. The children had to sit in silence for 35 minutes until it was all over. “My first thought was, Not in my school district! Not in my town!” recalls Kate Lawler. “The next day that I had to put him on the bus was very hard. What am I sending him off to? I no longer have the same trust I felt before getting that note.”

Despite tragedies such as Columbine, and media attention to the issue of school violence, the fact is that schools are safer now than eight years ago, according to the most recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and the FBI. Children are far more likely to come to harm away from school grounds than on them. But the problem is, neither kids nor parents feel safe.

Ironically, it is the schools’ well-meaning attempts to keep their grounds safe that are scaring kids the most: metal detectors at entrances, increased police presence, random weapon checks, and preparatory lockdown (or “duck and cover”) drills. In these surprise drills, children, even those in kindergarten, are directed to line up against an interior wall of their classroom while the teacher locks the door, turns off the lights, and pulls down the shades. As everyone sits in silence, the principal and uniformed police officers walk through the dark halls, rattling the handles to check that all doors are securely locked.

“We do explain to the children that maybe this is scary,” says Martha Beck, principal of Pine Bush Elementary School in suburban Albany, New York. School officials also explain, however, that it feels much safer to know how to respond in potentially dangerous situations. “Any time children have knowledge, it gives them more control. How much is too much information? We’re frankly still working on that.”

The reality is that, as much as we would like to, we can’t completely shield our children from this difficult issue.

HOW TO HELP KIDS COPE

Recent research shows that children’s fear of violence is becoming more commonplace, whether or not their school has been involved in such an incident. When Sesame Workshop, makers of the hit TV shows Sesame Street and Dragon Tales, asked 233 children nationwide, aged 6 to 11, to name their fears, almost two thirds expressed fear of guns, violence, and death. Among 9- to 11-year-olds, the number rose to 86 percent.

In a survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Marina del Rey, California, of more than 15,000 teenagers, about 40 percent of middle schoolers reported feeling unsafe at school. And, ominously, almost a third of the middle-school boys said they could get a gun if they wanted to. Which is why today you have to be prepared to talk with your kids about school violence.

“Parents do their children a great service by fostering an atmosphere in which anything can be talked about, where the child has an opportunity to give voice to his feelings,” says Yale University child psychoanalyst Steven Marans, Ph.D., director of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence in New Haven, Connecticut. By talking with your children about their fears, you frame the issue in terms that help kids cope with concerns as they arise. Here’s how and when to do just that:

• First, listen. Begin by regularly asking your kids about the day’s events at school. Their concerns will bubble up. “The challenge is, as parents, can we listen long enough to hear what it is that worries them most?” says Marans. If your child seems anxious but resistant to talking, reintroduce the discussion the next day.

•Talk specifics, not generalities. If a shooting incident is all over the news, you need to discuss it. With the 6-and-under set, use simple language, avoiding
safe at school
(continued)

possibly alarming words like “intruder,” “guns,” and “shooting.” “You might
tell them that something bad happened and some kids got upset and somebody
died,” says Bob Batterson, a child psy-
chiatrist at Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri.

Sometime between the ages of 8 and 10, children are better able to handle a
more complete explanation. You might
tell them that someone was shot at
school and that this is why weapons
don’t belong there. “Let them guide you
with their questions,” says Batterson.
“Give just enough information to answer
their specific question, and don’t answer
anything more than what they are asking.” Until around 10, children do
not think abstractly, so keep your con-
vocations very concrete and focused on
their school, their friends, their principal.

With children older than 11, you can
expect to have a serious dialogue. Ask
them what they’ve heard or seen. Do
they have questions? Have them explain
in their own words what they under-
stand. Correct any inaccuracies. For
instance, your son may have heard that
800 kids were hurt, when in fact one
child was injured in a school of 800
students.

• Help your child name her concerns.
   Having a label for a feeling helps prevent it from spi-
raling out of control. Just being
able to voice horror at a school
shooting, and to express con-
cern that it could happen at her
own school, makes it easier for
a child to manage her fears.
   “Vocabulary is key: If you can’t
name what you’re feeling, it’s
like this hazy smoke inside you.
You know you don’t feel good,
but you can’t get a handle on
it,” says Janice Hutchinson, a
pediatrician and child psychi-
atrist in Washington, D.C.

• Stop her from speculating wildly.
   What should you say if
your child admits she’s afraid
that a classmate will bring in a
weapon? “Get it down to the
concrete,” says Bennett Leven-
thal, director of child and ado-
scent psychiatry at the
University of Chicago. “Encour-
ge her to talk about it, asking
her questions like ‘Who do you
think would do that? What did they do
that makes you think that?’” Focusing
on the concrete will help dispel any gen-
eral anxiety created by sensationalized
coverage of school shootings.
• Talk to your child even if he isn’t asking questions.
   Many children who feel anx-
ious won’t be able to articulate why they
feel that way: They don’t have the expe-
rience or vocabulary to do so. “Watch
for physical signs of anxiety, such as
clinging, ambiguous aches and pains,
or more whiny behavior in general,” says
Carolyn Saarni, Ph.D., a developmental
psychologist at Sonoma State University
in Rohnert Park, California.

If your child is suddenly afraid of
attending school, don’t automatically
keep her home; by doing so you con-
firm that her worst fears are justified.
“In a loving but firm way, reassure your
child, ‘I know you’re going to be safe;
you may be a little nervous, but you’re
going to be able to deal with it,’” says
Ted Feinberg, Ed.D., assistant director
of the National Association of School
Psychologists. Be sure to tell the teacher
how your child feels. If your child is
really struggling with her fears (to the
point of becoming hysterical or severely
depressed), consult your pediatrician.

• Reassure, reassure, reassure. Once
you’ve heard what it is that most wor-
ries your child, point out tangible reali-
ties—the buzzer for admitting visitors,
the school resource officer (in many
school districts, a police officer in uni-
form with a gun), regular police patrols—
that show him that adults are keeping
his school safe. Stress to him that “your
school is safe, and as your parent I’m
going to do everything I can to make sure
this doesn’t happen to you, and to keep
you safe,” says Hutchinson.

A specific anxiety about school safety
can become general and pervasive, and
a child may become fearful that some-
thing will happen to her family, Hutchin-
son explains. Again, reassure your child
that you’re fine, that you’re going to stay
fine, and that you’re always working to
care for her.

• Reinforce your family’s values. In a con-
versation about a bullying incident, for
example, you can remind your child of
the family rule against hurting people.
Encourage your child to be a partner
in keeping his school safe by telling you
or another trusted adult if he notices a
classmate hurting another child.

This dialogue with your children “is a
conversation that never ends,” says
Leventhal. “It’s an ongoing process”—
one in which parents help children cope
with the inevitable difficulties and some-
times harsh realities of life.

Bullying is violence too

If you suspect that bullying is a problem for your child, you’re probably right. In a
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development survey of 15,686
students in grades six through ten, nearly 17 percent reported being bullied in a
recent school term; another 13 percent said they had bullied others.

Although evidence does not indicate that bullying typically leads to extreme violence, such
as school shootings, on the part of either the aggressor or the victim, it is important to stop
bullying because it creates an environment of fear and intimidation. And by allowing it to
continue, teachers and schools send students the message that a certain level of violence
and aggression is normal, says child psychiatrist Bennett Leventhal. It also has long-term
consequences for your child: Kids who are bullied are more likely to be depressed and
have difficulty making friends; once they reach adulthood, they often suffer from depres-
sion and low self-esteem. Here’s how you can recognize bullying—and stop it:

• WHAT IS IT? Bullying is any abusive behavior, repeated over time, in which there is
a power imbalance between the two children: The child being bullied is younger,
weaker, or less popular than the bully.

• WHAT ARE THE SIGNS YOUR CHILD IS A VICTIM? Key tip-offs include balking at or
avoiding school, falling grades, general unhappiness, depression, and trouble sleeping.

• WHAT YOU CAN DO: “Help your child deal with the situation himself, if at all pos-
sible,” says SuEllen Fried, author of Bullies & Victims. Admittedly, this is difficult:
Bullying most often happens in the middle-school years, when kids are least likely
to go to their parents for help. Brainstorm with your child some possible solutions, such
as changing his body language—for example, not crying but remaining stoic in the
face of bullying—and staying in the company of others. An important caveat: If your
child is being beaten up, get school officials to stop it. An easy step that won’t single
your child out as a tattletale: Increase supervision where the bullying takes place.