

**CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS
RESOURCE PAPER**

**SCHOOLYARD TRAGEDIES:
COPING WITH THE AFTERMATH**

*“Ring around the rosy
a pocket full of posies
ashes, ashes,
we all fall down.”*

Many of us grew up singing and running around in circles to the tune “Ring Around the Rosy.” But few of us know that the popular children’s nursery rhyme was borne of tragedy. While hundreds of thousands of people died during the bubonic plague of medieval Europe, children found a way to cope by creating the game.¹

“Ring around the rosy” told of the rose-colored ring seen on the skin of those afflicted with the fatal disease. “A pocket full of posies” referred to the flowers thrown on the graves of those who died. “Ashes, ashes” told of the villages and bodies that were burned to prevent the spread of the plague. “We all fall down” is what happened to those who died.

Children invent their own ways of dealing with catastrophe -- whether it be widespread starvation and disease, the horrors of war or, as seen recently here in the United States, the terror of schoolyard shootings. This type of play allows children to ventilate their feelings and cope with what has happened to them and their friends -- a natural reaction that may be expected after a tragedy.

While still too unusual to be considered a trend, the 1997-98 school year saw an alarming number of schoolyard shootings, many perpetrated by children under 15 years of age. The risk of death at school is still extremely small, with chances at about one in 1 million school days. But, according to the National School Safety Center, 40 students, teachers and other school personnel were killed during the 1997-98 school year, most of them as a result of shootings. These reports are based on newspaper accounts and may not include every incident reported in the United States during the school year.² Besides the high number, what was unusual about these shooting is that they resulted in multiple deaths and occurred in rural areas, where many would not expect such a level of violence. In fact, many psychologists are debating whether this is a trend signaling a new strain of a violence virus they know little about, or whether it is an anomaly.³

TWO KINDS OF SCHOOLS

The rash of shootings has brought a new recognition of the need to be prepared for schoolyard tragedies. “Each school district must confront the fact that there are two kinds of schools in America today: those that have had a major crisis and those that are about to,” said Richard Lieberman, a school psychologist with the Los Angeles Unified School District, and member of the CASP Board of Directors.⁴

There is emergency help available when tragedies -- ranging from hurricanes and earthquakes to violence -- strike schools. The National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) Community Crisis Response Team has partnered with the National Association of School Psychologists’ National Emergency Assistance Team to respond to these types of disasters. The group has been called to such emergencies 11 times since it was formed in August 1997. The National Red Cross also offers emotional support as well as shelter, blankets

and other necessary items during calamities. Other groups, including CASP, are researching and developing response plans for when disaster strikes.

A member of the NOVA/NEAT team, Lieberman of the Los Angeles Unified School District, was one of two school psychologists who were called to the Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark., in March 1998 when two students ages 11 and 13, killed four students and one teacher and injured 10 others. The young shooters had set off a fire alarm and, from a forested area across the playground, shot students as they exited the buildings.

"Many students suffered from post traumatic stress symptoms. They reported intrusive thoughts and recollections, nightmares; and the parents observed regressive behaviors, eating and sleeping irregularities and a myriad of somatic complaints. Every child had a different response -- one child cowered on the arm of a friend, another cried for her lost friends and recently deceased grandmother. There was the angry child and the others who acted silly," Lieberman said. "Their initial responses of fear and anger evolved to the complex emotions of guilt, shame and grief."⁵

The school moved quickly to clean the carnage from the walkways; the media was moved to a hill within sight of the school grounds but not within shouting distance. By the time the students were to return to school a day later, the only evidence of the horror were the bullet holes in the gymnasium walls. The holes serve as a reminder to the community that this tragedy did occur and that it must be incorporated into their community life.⁶

GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

And that is one of the keys to recovering from a schoolyard tragedy: Getting back into the routine implies that the community is under control again, that the sound of the school bells and the fire drill will again be heard, that the fifth graders will welcome their entrance into the sixth grade. But there are many issues that must be addressed before a community can resume its daily routines. Group Crisis Intervention is a series of debriefing protocols developed by Marlene Young, NOVA's executive director.⁷ These techniques, to be used in the immediate aftermath, can assist survivors as they regain a sense of control over their lives and begin the process of reconstructing a new life:

Safety and security: Until safety is addressed, other concerns will be tangential.

Victims' risk for suicide should be assessed and individuals who have survived the death of loved ones need to be given a sense of security. Caregivers should find privacy for victims to express emotions, ensure confidentiality and reassure survivors that their reactions are acceptable and not uncommon. Disruptive factors, such as media, should be barred from the school grounds. Caregivers trained to deal with the emotions and reactions the students are experiencing should be allowed, including religious leaders.

Ventilation and validation: Ventilation refers to the process of allowing victims/survivors to "tell their own story." Students will need to talk about what happened; use age-appropriate techniques. Some will be angry, some sad, some will not be able to verbalize their feelings. However, they must be assured that their emotional actions are valid. Do not tell them that you know how they feel; you don't. Instead, tell them it is O.K. to have the feelings, emotions and problems (such as loss of appetite, inability to sleep or more extreme reactions) they are experiencing.

Prediction and preparation: Survivors of school tragedies often want to know what is going to happen next. Assist survivors as they prepare for the practical issues that they must face, such as funerals, the criminal justice system, and media. Their families also must be aware of stress reactions, including fear, anger, confusion, guilt, shame and grief, that could happen in the future. Major family events, such as birthdays, anniversaries and holidays could trigger emotional reactions.

CONTINUING CARE

Emotional care and concern for the victims should continue. The National Association of School Psychologists suggests that schools and the community provide the following support to victims of tragedies after emergency response teams leave:

- Let students know there will continue to be people who are willing to listen. Tell them who is available and when and where to find these people.
- Discuss feelings with the class or individual students who feel most affected.
- Discuss the disaster in the context of other subjects, e.g., discuss suicide prevention in a junior high health class, discuss weather-related disasters in an elementary social studies class.
- Provide facts to help allay fears. For example, if a classmate dies of cancer, facts about prevalence and cures may help students who are fearful when they feel unwell.
- Think ahead to effects which might be delayed. Be aware that similar incidents in another location may trigger renewed feelings. Plan a special remembrance for the one-year anniversary of the disaster, thereby diverting renewed reaction if the anniversary date is ignored.
- Prepare for long-term reactions which are normal, such as the continued need to discuss a hurricane or shooting.
- Watch for pathological long-term reactions. Pathological long-term reactions are more severe than those experienced by most children and might include persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event through intense recollections, dreams, flashbacks or hallucinations; persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma or numbing of responsiveness; diminished interest in usual activities; or signs of increased arousal, such as sleep difficulties, irritability, hypervigilance, disturbances in concentration, exaggerated startle response.
- Find ways to emphasize a return to stability: When the disaster abates, return to previous schedules and maintain these for a time, even if some change in routine was planned, in order to provide a sense of security and comfort.¹

Education about the cause, prevention and what to expect in the aftermath can help parents and students cope with schoolyard catastrophes. Schools and community agencies can collaborate on such things as workshops to educate the public about coping with disasters. Residents can be mobilized to ensure that violence prevention courses become a part of the curriculum in the nation's schools. School officials, survivors and others affected by the recent shootings are actively pursuing violence prevention programs for the nation's schools. This type of advocacy and activism can be therapeutic for those affected by tragedy. It is one critical step in the process of turning a victim into a survivor.²

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

In the aftermath of schoolyard tragedies, communities are often left wondering about the "what if" questions: What if the student or perpetrator had received the attention he or she needed? What could we have done to prevent this tragedy? As a reaction to the 1997-98 school year shootings, President Clinton directed the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice to develop an early warning guide to help "adults reach out to troubled children quickly and effectively."³ *Early warning, timely response: A Guide to Safe Schools* was delivered to every principal's desk at the beginning of the 1998-99 school year and is available at several web sites.⁴ The guide gives school communities reliable and practical information about what they can do to be prepared and to reduce the likelihood of violence. The hope is that school principals, whether working in small, rural towns or the inner-city, will see the need for violence prevention programs as successful methods to reduce campus confrontations.

It also includes a warning about jumping to conclusions about students who may fit a

specific profile or set of early warning indicators. The document, which was written in part by the National Association of School Psychologists, calls for school officials to use the following principles to ensure that early warning signs are not misinterpreted:

- Do no harm. Get help for the child instead of using the early warning signs as rationale to exclude, isolate or punish. Instead, as federal law requires, qualified professionals must give individualized evaluations and make recommendations on how to deal with the troubled child.
- Understand violence and aggression within a context. Violent and aggressive behavior as an expression of emotion may have many antecedent factors and certain environments can set it off. If a child does not have adequate coping skills he or she may react with aggression.
- Avoid stereotypes. Race, socioeconomic status, cognitive or academic ability or physical appearance are false cues of how a child may act. In fact, such stereotypes can unfairly harm children, especially when the school community acts upon them.
- View warning signs within a development context. Youth at different levels of development have varying emotional and social capabilities. Know what is developmentally typical behavior so that those behaviors are not misinterpreted.
- Understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs. Research confirms that most children who are troubled and at risk for aggression exhibit more than one warning sign with more intensity over time. Thus, is it important not to overreact to single signs, words or actions.⁵

And what are those early warning signs, or signs of possible personal distress? And do they always work when predicting behavior that leads to violence? The authors of *Early warning, timely response...* make it clear that it is not always possible to predict behavior that will lead to violence. And, they say, none of these signs alone is sufficient for predicting aggression and violence. The early warning signs are offered only as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help. They are not equally significant, nor are they presented in the order of seriousness.⁶ However, they include:

- **Social withdrawal and excessive feeling of isolation.** Gradual and eventual complete withdrawal from social contacts can be an important indicator of a troubled child.
- **Excessive feeling of rejection.** Troubled children are often isolated from their peers. They may seek out aggressive friends who reinforce their violent tendencies.
- **Being a victim of violence.** Physical or sexual abuse may make some children at risk for becoming violent toward others.
- **Feelings of being picked on and persecuted.** Being constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule and humiliation may cause a youth to vent these feelings in inappropriate ways -- including possible aggression or violence.
- **Low school interest and poor academic performance.** It is important to assess emotional and cognitive reasons for changes in academic performance to determine the true nature of the problem.
- **Expression of violence in writings and drawings.** Many children produce work about violent themes that for the most part is harmless when taken in context. But an over representation of violence in writings and drawings directed consistently at specific individuals could signal emotional problems that could lead to violence. However, there is a real danger of misdiagnosing such a sign and professional guidance -- such as a school psychologist -- would be needed in such a situation.
- **Uncontrolled anger.** Anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior.
- **History of discipline problems.** Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These problems

could set the stage for aggressive behavior.

- **Past history of violent and aggressive behavior.** Unless provided with support and counseling, a youth who has a history of aggressive or violent behavior is likely to continue those behaviors. Children who engage in aggression and drug abuse before age 12, for example, are more likely to show violence later on than are children who begin such behavior at an older age.
- **Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes.** Intense prejudice toward others, coupled with other factors, may lead to violence against those who are perceived to be different.
- **Drug and alcohol use.** These actions expose youth to violence, either as perpetrators or victims, or both.
- **Affiliation with gangs.** Youth who join gangs, or emulate their behavior, may adopt violent-related values and react violently in certain situations.
- **Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.** Children and youth who inappropriately possess or have access to firearms can have an increased risk for violence -- and a higher probability of becoming victims.
- **Serious threats of violence.** While idle threats are common responses to frustration, one of the most reliable indicators that a youth is likely to commit a dangerous act toward self or others is a detailed and specific threat to use violence. Recent incidents across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.⁷

Many school districts throughout the nation are training their teachers how to recognize and respond to early warning signs. Teachers and school personnel are also receiving instructions on how to react during a school crisis. These lessons range from calling 911 before calling the district superintendent to how to disarm an intruder to holding mock crises and drills, such as hostage taking, to prepare for what could be the inevitable.⁸ Other schools and districts are using metal detectors, drug tests, dress codes and uniforms, have taken out lockers and insist that all book bags and backpacks be made of see-through material. Others have gone so far as to close faculty restrooms, which increases the presence of teachers in the restrooms.

While many of these actions are controversial, one thing is clear -- that violence prevention programs, counseling for potentially violent students and emotional aid for victims can only strengthen the nation's resolve to keep schools safe for our children.

ENDNOTES

¹ Richard Lieberman, school psychologist with the Los Angeles Unified School District's Suicide Prevention Unit, telephone interview, July 28, 1998.

² National School Safety Center, "Latest News," NSSC Web site, August, 1998. The National School Safety Center has a variety of school safety-related publications that can be ordered through its Web site at www.nssc1.org.

³ Scott Sleek, "Experts scrambling on school shootings," *APA Monitor*, August 1998, American Psychological Association. The APA's Web site offers a wealth of information on school psychology trends and can be accessed at www.apa.org.

⁴ Richard Lieberman, "Coping with School Violence: The Jonesboro Aftermath," *CASP Today*, California Association of School Psychologists, Summer 1998, Page 27. Lieberman was paraphrasing Ron Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center.

⁵ Ibid, Lieberman, Page 26.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ As cited by Richard Lieberman in *CASP Today*, Summer, 1998.

¹ Debby Waddell, Ph.D. and Alex Thomas, Ph.D., "Disaster: Helping Children Cope, A Handout for Teachers," with additional material by Andrea Canter, Ph.D., National Association of School Psychologists, 1998. This handout is part of a series offered by NASP called *Helping Children at Home and School: Handouts from Your School Psychologist*.

² Lieberman, "Coping with School Violence: The Jonesboro Aftermath," *CASP Today*, Summer, 1998.

³ Kevin Dwyer, David Osher and Cynthia Warger, *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safe schools*, Introduction page, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC., August, 1998.

⁴ Web sites from which the *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safe schools* document can be downloaded include www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywarn.html or www.naspweb.org/center.html, as well as at the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research.

⁵ Dwyer, et al., *Early warning, timely response*, Pages 6-7.

⁶ Ibid. Page 8.

⁷ Ibid. Pages 8-11.

⁸ Jessica Portner, "Officials Take No Chances After Killings," *Education Week*, June 3, 1998, Vol 17, number 38, page 1, 10-11.