

Helping Children Cope With Violence

Why do kids shoot other kids?

“Violence is a sick and broken and cruel way of trying to be noticed and trying to be loved.” (From *Bad Stuff in the News, a Guide to Handling the Headlines* by Rabbi Marc Gellman and Monsignor Thomas Hartman)

When we think of a college campus, we think of a more idyllic setting, where young men and women come together to learn about the world and about themselves and others. We don't think of it as a war zone where thirty-two people end up dead one morning because a student at the university was emotionally unstable. Obviously the young man was hurting inside, hurting badly. He felt isolated and unloved. He couldn't find a place for himself in the world and decided to take it out on all those people around him. No one could see inside him and know just how badly he was hurting, or surely they would have done something about it. We know that nothing is as lonely and isolating as not feeling loved.

Should someone have seen what was happening to this young man? Certainly. And perhaps they did. However, nothing can change the events of Monday, April 16, 2007. Now it is up to us as parents, teachers, and the church to deal with the aftermath. How can we keep this from happening again? There are things that we can do. We'll get better at recognizing the problems the young man had and perhaps even better at treating them. For a little while we will focus on what it means to include outsiders and help people not feel so all “alone.”

The guidelines in this article will help churches and families deal with the present. What Cho Seung-Hui did was wrong. Very wrong. Where did we fail that young man? How did we miss the signs that indicated he was troubled? As we look back, we know they were there. We can't help those people who died that day, but we can help our children feel loved and cared about now. We can also help them deal with their anxiety and fears when they ask us the question, “Can this happen to me?”

Needs of Children

Be Accepting

Children need your acceptance of their feelings and behaviors during this time of fear, grief, anxiety, loss, anger, and confusion. Let your children know how you feel and how you cope.

Be a Listener

Be a good listener and non-judgmental in your attitudes toward children's feelings and concerns. Children will have difficulty expressing what is wrong, but you can help them name their feelings and

sort out why they feel the way they do.

Be Assuring

Children need assurance of safety and security expressed honestly, realistically, and in terms they can understand. They need reassurance that they are not in danger and are cared for by family members or others who love them. The likelihood of a similar event happening at their school is very small. Avoid being overly protective. Talk with your child about concrete things you can do to help make things better for those persons who were involved. You might be surprised at what your child comes up with.

Be Comforting

Allow your children to be more “clingy” than usual. They are seeking security in a time of chaos.

Be Encouraging

Children need opportunities for venting their feelings, acting out the experience, and telling their stories. Encourage them in means of self-expression that are non-destructive to themselves or to others.

Be Loving and Caring

Love, love, and more love. Children need to know that you care. That you are available. That your love is deeper and longer than anything they can imagine.

Be Trustworthy

Children need to know they can trust you—your feelings, what you will do, and what they can expect of the future. Trust is always important to a child, but especially so now.

Be Honest

Be honest in answering children's questions. Give simple facts, without too much information, in a loving, caring atmosphere. Children cope best with what they know. Yes, this happened. Yes, it was a bad thing. Yes, it could happen at any college. But the odds are that it won't. Sometimes all we can say is "I don't know" or "Let's try to find out." Don't be afraid to use words such as “death,” “dying,” or “evil.” Your children understand these words on their own level.

Be Hopeful

Children need to know that events like this will not happen all the time. If these things do happen, God is still there with them to help them and strengthen them. People all around them are working to keep them safe at their schools and in their communities.

Be Real

Children may have difficulty distinguishing between fact and fantasy in watching television. Help them know what is real and what is a story. Journalism in today's world goes for the goriest and grossest stories imaginable just to sell newspapers or attract viewers. Remember, ninety percent of what a child learns comes through the eyes. Avoid watching the news accounts of this tragedy over and over and over again on television.

Be Normal

When children's lives have been turned upside down, put some semblance of stability back into their lives. Keep routines such as bedtime, mealtime, school attendance, and homework, as close to normal as possible. This will help children have a sense of being in control.

Be Supportive

Children need your support when disturbing videos are shown on television or when other children make disparaging remarks that hurt. Children may want to focus on a positive activity that will make them feel that they are in control. Talk with children about ways to help other children feel included. Support them in this role wherever possible. Whenever a child feels threatened at school or in other public areas, take it seriously.

Be Understanding

Children need the calm presence of and contact with family members or adult care givers who understand their feelings and needs. Your role will be to interpret, clarify, and respond to the children's questions. Avoid withholding important information. Children can tell when something is not right.

Ways Children Respond After Violence

Children may respond:

physically

- to the sights of the event as seen through television, newspapers, and magazines
- to the sense of not being “safe” in formerly familiar environments
- to loud noises and unsettling crowds

emotionally

- by becoming hyperactive, overly busy, active, or restless as they try to make sense of the event
- by becoming egocentric, feeling they are the only ones affected and thinking only of self (Will someone shoot me?)
- by being fearful of injury or death to a loved one (such as a sibling who may be in college)
- by reacting negatively when separated from the family, or by being afraid they will be left alone
- by becoming friendly and glad to be alive
- by becoming very talkative and wanting to share their experiences with everyone
- by overly responding to their emotions of anger by hitting, kicking, or throwing objects
- by being upset more easily or showing worry unnecessarily

psychologically

- by needing to tell their own story over and over
- by becoming dependent and fearful
- by feeling guilt and seeking theological explanations (God did not “allow” this to happen.)
- by role reversal or transference. (If a family member were killed, they may try to fill the missing person's role in the family.)
- by having a higher than normal anxiety and stress level
- by being afraid to go to bed at night or to go to sleep for fear of something happening
- by coping through denial that certain feelings are present, or by suppressing that this is actually happening

socially

- by becoming shy and withdrawn from both adults and peers
- by being overly fearful of strangers, especially if they are in uniform
- by clinging to parents for fear that one or both of them will leave (They may refuse to go to school or church, feeling it is unsafe.)
- by becoming upset more easily (shown by crying, fighting, or exhibiting other forms of disruptive behavior)

spiritually

- by asking questions about God. (Why didn't God stop the shooter? Why didn't God protect the young men and women on that college campus? If these people were doing nothing wrong, why did God allow this terrible thing to happen?)
- by lacking trust in God (Will God take good care of me? If someone shoots my daddy or mommy, who will care for me?)
- by questioning God's presence with us (If God is here, why do I feel so bad? Why didn't God keep the killings from happening?)

Ways to Help Children Express Their Feelings

Water Play

Playing in a tub of warm water stimulates inhibited children and soothes explosive children. A warm bath may help relieve stress.

Play dough

Play dough can be worked or reworked to express feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety.

Painting

Painting can help children express moods of joy, sorrow, fear, or anger. Children paint what they feel or what matters in their lives. Finger painting is a good medium for such expression.

Puzzles

Puzzles can be a way for children to create order out of chaos. Children whose lives have become disoriented, confused, or disrupted will often feel better after putting a puzzle together.

Toys

Toys can help children relive a bad experience or play out their feelings. Often the victim becomes the rescuer, the one in control.

Puppets

The use of puppets enables children to become talkative and to reenact an unhappy experience. Puppets are good listeners.

Books

Children often lack the vocabulary to express their feelings. A book can help define a child's understanding of death, violence, and anxiety.

Cuddly Toys

Sitting quietly with a cuddly toy can soothe an angry or fearful child.

Music

Music allows an emotional release and the free expression of feelings through songs, creative movement, and games.

Play

Active play allows for release of emotional energy in a socially approved way. Quiet games may be comforting to a child who chooses to be alone.

Storytelling

Storytelling, drama, and roleplays are ways to help children tell their stories, to act out feelings, and to resolve conflicts.

What Parents Can Do

- Help your children distinguish between the reality of television coverage of the event and the fantasy of movies, especially for young children. These young men and women died. They won't get up after the cameras stop rolling and walk away.
- Limit the time you permit your children to watch the news. Watch the news with them and encourage them to talk about what you saw. Correct any misunderstandings and answer any questions.
- Keep routines and expectations of behavior as close to normal as possible to give children stability in their daily lives.
- Be honest in answering children's questions. Keep answers simple, without giving more information than the child needs at the time.
- Be honest with your own feelings. Discuss these with your children or help them know that you have some of the same feelings that they have.
- Assure them of your love. Reassure them that you will keep them safe and will be there to care for them.
- Help children realize that they are not responsible for what has happened and could not have prevented it.
- Provide comfort in ways that feel reassuring to you and to your children.
- Watch for signs of maladjustment to the event. Spend extra time putting children to bed. Leave the night light on, if needed. Give opportunity for them to ask questions, express concerns, or share their feelings before going to sleep.
- Listen to what the children say, how they say it, and what they play. Is there evidence of fear, anxiety, or insecurity? Talk about and clarify any feelings shown in the conversation or play.
- Have quiet family times together. Spend time sharing concerns, expressing feelings, feeling God's

reassuring presence, and praying to God to express your needs and concerns.

- Assure children that God listens to our prayers and answers them. That God continues to love us. That God is a forgiving God. That God knows our needs. That God cares how they feel, think, or act. That God can take away their fears and anxiety. That God is always with us and will guide us and strengthen us to meet whatever lies ahead.
- Plan for the family to attend church and Sunday school regularly to feel the support and strength of this community of believers.
- If a child's adjustment does not return to normal after a sufficient time, consider talking with someone (minister, school counselor, or professional counselor) who understands children and their needs.

What Churches Can Do

- Pray for those persons who are directly involved in the event. Pray for the families who lost loved ones in the shootings.
- Engage in Bible study and reflection on the worth of each and every person and how all persons are precious to God and loved.
- Offer your facilities for or begin your church's ecumenical support group.
- Provide access to your church library for members of the support group.
- Find members who can donate time and expertise to start your own clinic to provide counseling services to community members who are living on reduced incomes.
- Schedule regular prayer vigils for the families who were affected by the tragedy.
- Open your recreational hall or begin new programming for youth and children as a physical outlet for their emotions.