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Safe Schools and Springtime Stress: Prevention Issues

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The spring semester has been marred in recent years by tragic shootings in several of our nation's schools. The shootings at Virginia Tech University join tragedies in communities such as Jonesboro AR, Springfield OR, Littleton CO, Lake Worth FL, Santee and El Cajon CA, and Red Lake MN. School personnel should be aware that a set of constant factors and pressures on students may contribute to increased threats of violence and behavior problems each spring. These include:

- Frustrations from the long school year
- Anticipation/anxiety issues for summer vacation
- Transition issues regarding changing relationships with graduation or move to a new school
- Failing grades and recognition of the reality of repeating the same grade
- Pressure of semester exams
- Awareness of provocative spring anniversary dates (highly publicized school shootings, Hitler's birthday, Oklahoma City bombing, the Branch Davidian fire in Waco)
- High stakes testing results (mandatory retention, possible denial of a high school diploma)

Additional Stressors

Additionally, students face stressors from broader societal factors, such as the ongoing war in Iraq, the continuing threat of terrorism, the rash of violent weather in numerous states, and now, sadly, horror over the shootings at Virginia Tech. The magnitude of this tragedy is likely to be felt in schools and universities throughout the country. Depending on proximity and individual student needs, educators at all levels may need to respond to heightened anxiety over school safety and violence, grief or outrage, and increased mental health problems for students with pre-existing stressors and other risk factors, such as depression. Extensive media coverage may also contribute to the risk of copycat behavior.

Anticipating Needs

There are lessons to be learned from past tragedies. Research findings indicate that, during the period from six to eighteen months following each tragedy, an increased frequency of mental health and family difficulties surfaced in those who were affected by the traumas. Following such tragedies, there were a number of suicides by both adults and children. It is important that school personnel not underestimate either the initial or long-term impact of a crisis on students as well as staff members. Traumatized adolescents, in particular, have shown increased reckless behavior, substance abuse, depression, and suicidal behavior. Children of all ages may be fearful of the future, regress behaviorally and/or academically, and often experience sleeping difficulties. Student behaviors and school safety concerns that may surface during spring are:

- Increased bullying
- Lack of tolerance of diversity
- Increased threats of violence
- Increased misbehavior
- Increased self-mutilation

- Increased suicidal behavior
- Increased bomb threats

The recent U.S. Secret Service report on targeted school violence concluded:

- There is no definite profile of previous student shooters, as they varied in race, ethnicity, family background, and level of school success.
- Almost all of the perpetrators told someone about their plans to commit an act of violence.
- Revenge was the primary motive.
- Two-thirds of the perpetrators were suicidal and were the victims of bullying.

Any student who is experiencing such fears or anxieties is a student who is not learning. To maximize student achievement and success—as well as safety—this spring, it is imperative that schools provide an environment where students feel they are safe.

Prevention Activities

Statistically, school shootings are actually rare occurrences but the tragedy at Virginia Tech reminds us once again that we cannot be complacent regarding either school campus security or student mental health needs. It is recommended that school administrators and support personnel pay careful attention to the climate in their schools this spring. Increased visibility of school personnel in hallways, lunchrooms, etc. during changing periods and before and after school is recommended. In addition, school personnel should be vigilant to any indicators of bullying, prejudice, or other forms of harassment.

Key recommendations for school administrators and support personnel include:

- Provide staff and parents information on talking with students about violence and tragedy.
- Provide information on recognizing students experience stress, anxiety, or a mental health problem.
- Institute stress management activities and emphasize to students the importance of letting someone know if they need help handling stress and anxiety.
- Develop threat assessment procedures.
- Create safety task forces that include students.
- Build positive faculty/student relations with the goal that students view adults as trustworthy and caring.
- Develop policies and programs to reduce bullying.
- Find ways to make school populations smaller to help instill in students a sense of belonging.
- Provide classroom discussions on safety and tolerance.
- Develop and/or clarify procedures to prevent youth suicide.
- Model tolerance of diversity.
- Among school and community leaders of different races and religions, collaborate and unite in efforts to support students.

School safety is an inside job that requires a commitment first from the student body and then from the faculty, parents and community. Two practical examples to get that commitment from students are:

- Conduct leadership meetings where the principal or superintendent meets with a variety of student leaders to discuss key issues.
- Have all students and their parents sign a safety contract that includes a commitment to manage anger, be tolerant of others, reduce bullying, and report threats of violence to adults at school.

Many parents are especially fearful and concerned about school safety. Include parents in safety planning activities and give them clear comprehensive information if safety concerns arise.

No one wants to make a prediction about future tragedy, but this is certainly a time for adults to increase supervision of children and students and to have many meaningful dialogues. Mental health services and wellness programs in our schools have never been more important. It is critical that school administrators review these important issues and their crisis plans with their staff and coordinate closely with school and local police. We hope that every school and university in America will have a safe conclusion of the school year.

Resources for School Personnel

[Bullying Prevention and Intervention](#)

[Bullies and Victims: Information for Parents](#) (English)

[Bullies and Victims: Information for Parents](#) (Spanish)

[Dealing With Death at School](#): Guidelines for School Administrators

[Death and Grief in the Family: Tips for Parents](#) (English)

[Death and Grief in the Family: Tips for Parents](#) (Spanish)

[Preventing School Violence: A Plan for Safe and Engaging Schools](#)

[PTSD: Coping After a Crisis](#)

[Traumatized Children: Tips for Parents and Educators](#)

[Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Students](#)

[Threat Assessment: An Essential Component of a Comprehensive Safe School Program](#)

[Understanding and Responding to Students Who Self-Mutilate](#)

[Self-Mutilation: Information and Guidance for School Personnel](#)

[School Safety: A Learning Matter - *Education Week* Commentary](#)

[Tips for School Administrators for Reinforcing School Safety](#)

Dwyer, L., Osher, D. & Warger, C. (1998). *Early warning, timely response: A guide to safe schools*. Washington, DC: Department of Education (available from <http://cecp.air.org/guide>).

Lazarus, P., Jimerson, S. & Brock, S. (Eds.) (2002). *Best practices in school crisis prevention and intervention*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. (see www.nasponline.org/publications).

Poland, S. (2000). *Coping with crisis: Lessons learned*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West (see www.sopriswest.com).

Websites for Safe Schools Resources

National Association of School Psychologists—www.nasponline.org

National Mental Health Association—www.nmha.org

National Resource Center for Safe Schools—www.safetyzone.org

Safe and Responsive Schools Project—www.indiana.edu/~safeschl

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