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School Shootings: How Do We Cope?

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School Shootings:
On the early morning of December 14, 2012, students aged six to ten filed into their classrooms at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, ready to begin just another school day. Shortly after, parents of children arrived at the school to help students build gingerbread houses in preparation for the Holidays. But at 9:34 a.m., instead of the merry delight of the winter season, the halls were filled with the ringing sound of gunshots and the lingering smell of gunpowder.

The culprit was Adam Lanza, a 20 year-old alumnus of Sandy Hook who had been recently diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Early on December 14th, Lanza shot through a plate glass window at the school’s entrance and brutally murdered twenty five- and six-year-old students along with six faculty members, before turning the gun on himself. Most terrifying of all was the fact that Lanza not only shot the children in cold blood, but shot them all several times. Lanza’s bloody rampage through the halls of Sandy Hook marked the deadliest shooting by one person and the second deadliest mass murder in American History (Riversong, 2014).

After Sandy Hook, the country was stunned, and the residents of Newtown, CT were devastated. The massacre reminded schools across the country that any school could be vulnerable at any time to this type of tragedy. The eyes of the public were open wide and pointed sharply at school security systems. How could a tragedy such as this be prevented in the future? Did we not learn our lesson from Columbine? Schools did what they could to push through the last few days before winter break, and when class resumed, security at schools started to look drastically different.

Around the country, school districts implemented numerous security systems to ensure the safety of students and staff. Maintenance in Cold Spring, Minn. installed 170 bulletproof whiteboards in classrooms and trained teachers to use their bodies to protect students. Schools in Ashe-ville, NC spent $1.3 million on a new surveillance system. In rural West Plains, Montana, select teachers and staff are now able to carry concealed weapons during the school day (Marklein, 2013).

Security measures were taken close to home as well, right here in West Michigan. Schools in East Grand Rapids
now require any visitors to enter through the main offices before gaining access to other parts of the buildings. The office is now the first line of defense against intruders such as Lanza. Additionally, both Grandville and Forest Hills school districts received voter support to pass a bond that revamped school entrances with surveillance cameras and a security system (Maroney, 2013). Other schools throughout the state of Michigan have hired armed law enforcement to be on patrol in school hallways, as well as systems that require visitors to be approved and buzzed into the building upon arrival.

Aside from increased security, the tragedy of Sandy Hook (as well as Columbine) has increased the demand for effective school counselors. Amanda Klinger, director of operations for the Educators School Safety Network, says that since the shooting, schools have focused mainly on security systems but they still have “a lot of work to do.” She notes, “[Schools] need to work with teachers to develop lockdown procedures that are more developmentally-appropriate for young students.” She also says that schools need more comprehensive plans in place for assessing threats and for responding to a wide range of crises, not just school shootings (Stokes, 2014). Klinger has a point. The aftermath of shootings such as these dramatically affect the loved ones, family members, and coworkers of those who were killed. Having an open as well as preventative environment can help those affected have an easier time coping with such a heartbreak.

The tragic Sandy Hook massacre has noticeably shifted public opinion about security in schools. Though schools remain the safest place for American children, the hot topic of “school shootings” has dramatically increased the demands on school districts to provide safe and secure environments for students and staff. Throughout the country, money continues to be allocated towards heightened security, even three years after the massacre. In 1999, only one out of every five schools had a security camera. Today three out of five do (Stokes, 2014). However, Ronald Stephans, executive director of the National School Safety Center in Westlake Village, Calif., reminds us that though the public pressure on schools to increase security has been “tremendous,” the probability of violence occurring at schools continues to be, statistically, very small (Marklein, 2013).

References


