



# Counselor's Corner

February 2016

## **Dr. Jamie Howard of the Child Mind Institute answers questions from parents and teachers about how to talk to children about school lockdown drills.**

Practicing lockdown drills is in the spirit of something we call coping ahead, being prepared, and I agree that it can be a positive experience. When you're dealing with something potentially frightening, if you can get ahead of the anxiety, then kids feel more in control. They feel a sense of competence. They know that the teachers have a plan, and the whole thing can make them feel quite safe.

You want to be really honest with kids about the low probability that a stranger would come into our school who doesn't belong here, who would want to hurt us. But we want to make sure we have a solid plan.

The manner or style in which you communicate this is important. You want to do it in an easy matter, and talk about it with a lot of confidence and competence. Because kids read the tone of voice, the emotion in the presentation.

You want to communicate that we're in charge, this is our school, and we want to make sure that only people who belong here are here. Just like if there a snow day we have a plan, if there's a storm we have a plan, if someone who doesn't belong here is in the building, we have a plan to handle it.

Then you want to practice from time to time. And you can even make it a community-building exercise. We want our whole school to stay safe. We're all taking part in this. We're strong and competent. We can handle this.

Avoiding the topic is not a good idea, because avoidance maintains anxiety. For any kids who do have anxiety about a school shooting, not talking about it is only colluding in the avoidance that maintains that anxiety. So you want to talk about it.

Also, this kind of drill might even present an opportunity to identify kids who might be more anxious than people know. You can talk to them in more detail. Ask open-ended questions about what they're scared about. You want to emphasize the low probability, concrete safety measures that are being taken, that sort of thing.

In terms of how explicit you should be, use common sense. Don't talk in code or use euphemisms with kids—that can make their imaginations go wild. But you also don't want to plant gruesome images in their heads. You want to strike the right balance.

You might want to say that if someone wanted to hurt our school, students or teachers, a member of our school community, we don't want that. We wouldn't stand for that. So we have a plan to prevent that from happening. A lot of the message is in the delivery: We're being extra careful here, but with this plan we are confident that we are going to stay safe.

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