

Parental Involvement in School Safety: What Every Parent Should Know; What Every Parent Should Say

Since the horrific incident at Columbine High School, parents have increasingly been encouraged to get involved in the school safety efforts being put forth by their children's schools. In working with many parents over the past two years, the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, a division of North Carolina's new Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has learned that parents often do not know how to begin their involvement and often say they do not have the time to get involved. What the Center suggests is that the simplest and maybe best form of involvement that parents can pursue is gaining knowledge about what their children's schools are doing in the arena of school safety and talking with their children about school safety.

Knowledge parents should gain about their children's school includes:

- knowing their children's school. This means being informed about what the school is doing to establish and maintain a safe learning environment. This knowledge is important so parents can answer their children's questions and concerns with facts rather than myth.
- knowing their children. This means that they should know what their children's typical behavior patterns are so that they will recognize when behaviors change. This allows for identification of warning signs.
- knowing warning signs. These are the signals of potential problems.
- knowing how to intervene when warning signs present themselves. Parents should have an understanding of how schools and community resources can be accessed should problems arise.
- knowing how to connect with their children. Every parent-child relationship is unique. Parents must take the lead in developing a relationship that works for both and allows each to gain understanding and insight. With specific reference to the safe schools issue, parents need to understand how each of their children is thinking about the issue and address each with appropriate levels of concern and understanding. Especially on this issue, children will take cues from their parents. Parents need to remember this and act accordingly.

Five points parents should say to their children about school safety include:

- explaining to their children what the facts are about school safety. Explaining to their children the steps their schools are taking to promote safety is important if their children ask questions.
- explaining the odds. The chances of being killed in schools are less than one in a million according to the US Department of Education. It is important to explain to children that schools are typically safe environments.
- explaining that everyone has a responsibility for making schools safe -- even children. Everyone should take responsibility. If a child sees inappropriate behavior or hears about the possibility that such behavior might happen (e.g., hears that someone is going to bring a gun to school), the child has a responsibility to tell an adult at school or the parent him/herself.
- explaining that violence is not an acceptable solution to problems the children may be experiencing. Parents need to explicitly address this because of the many messages that children are exposed to from various components of society which communicate that violence may be an appropriate response. It is important that parents articulate that violence is wrong.
- explaining that they are ready to listen. Parents should ask questions about how their children are feeling about the safety of their schools, and they should ask their children about more than feelings but also about behaviors (e.g., are there places at school they

avoid because they don't feel safe?). When asking the questions, it is then important that parents actively listen to the answers. If concerns are raised, parents need to follow up with the schools about them and keep their children informed about what is being done.

The Center for the Prevention of School Violence notes a measured approach which communicates appropriate levels of concern with knowledge is important. Parents need to communicate concerns without unduly raising levels of fear. A parent's desire to discuss this issue may not be mirrored by the child; parents therefore need to proceed cautiously with these conversations. They need to be informed and ready to discuss the issue but not so eager as to raise fears.