

Thoughts About the Sniper Attacks

Some suggestions for school staff and parents...

Heartfelt greetings to each of you...

There was no moment when it was clear that fear about the sniper attacks was rippling out into the psyches of kids across America. But it is clear that we've crossed that threshold by the numbers of counselors who have emailed asking for suggestions for parents and school staff.

Because you're on my email broadcast list for "when national events impact us all" handouts, I'm including you in this distribution. If you don't wish to be on this list, please just hit "reply" with a "delete from email list" message in the subject line and I'll drop your name.

For the rest of you, you're certainly welcome to use either the first two pages (long form) or the last page (bullets of suggestions) in any way you wish, as long as you make sure the footer remains intact so credit is given. There is another really important reason I ask that -- I often get emails or calls from parents or professionals who would like additional information or suggestions on something very specific.

So, you're welcome to put the one-pager on the back of a letter you send home to parents, or give either or both of these to your local newspaper, or whatever else you'd like. I wrote this under the duress of our local newspaper's 6:00 p.m. deadline today after a 4 p.m. call from a reporter who keeps in touch with me. (If I never knew before, I know why I don't work for a newspaper! Surviving life is stress enough!) I had planned to do this anyway, so this just made it happen *right* now!

If you have a newsletter for your school, your PTO or PTA, your association, your church, temple or synagogue, feel free to print these as an insert or for distribution.

Blessings to all of you who work in the trenches (or... in the hallways and classrooms of our schools), touching the lives of kids every day. You are my continual inspiration and have my full admiration and envy! Thank you on behalf of a thousand people who will never take the time to tell you the difference you make in the lives of their kids and our future.

All good thoughts,

Cheri

Cheri Lovre
Crisis Management Institute
PO Box 331
Salem, OR 97308
(503) 585-3484
clovre@earthlink.net
www.cmionline.org



As We Face the Sniper Attacks

Thoughts for Parents and School Staff

Certainly we all thought this would be over by now. The sniper attacks in the Washington DC area have gone on much longer than any of us would have expected.

The attacks of 9/11, although over a year behind us, have forever changed the American psyche. Over and over we hear people wish that we could go back to that naïve sense of safety we felt back before 9/11/2001. We all recognize that, on a very deep level, we can never go back to what life was like before the terrorist attacks.

During this past year, we've gone through a roller coaster of coming to terms with how life in America has changed, given the lack of control we realize we have over terrorism. But the sniper attacks bring about a different kind of fear. Even with as terrifying as international terrorism is, sniper attacks bring about a new level of psychological fear. This is terror coming from within. For the first few days, the fear was much more localized to the Washington DC area, but as we see the challenge this is for law enforcement, and we consider how very many people who have weapons may be on the edge, the fear begins to ripple out.

Perhaps the most vulnerable of our population, in terms of psychological distress, are our children. The younger children have a very difficult time perceiving the distance there is between Washington DC and where they live. Although the sniper circumstance is distressing to all of us, there are things we can do to be helpful to children and adolescents.

Create space for youth to talk about what troubles them. In order not to feed them our fears, consider bringing it up with more general thoughts, such as, "There are lots of things that kids your age worry about. Sometimes kids talk about things with their friends, and sometimes they think about it when they're lying in bed, falling asleep. When are the times your worries come to mind?" At this point, just listen! Then you might ask, "And when you worry, what kinds of things do you worry about?" THIS is the time when most parents and other adults miss the opportunity. Don't rush in too fast with reassurances! It is important to listen to what they say. It is far more important to convey to them that you are really hearing what they are saying, and to validate your understanding of their fears. Reply with validation first, such as, "I can imagine that other kids are thinking those same thoughts." or "... are having those same fears."

Then you might go on with, "Sometimes as we get older, we can understand some things in ways that help us feel better." And then, if they've brought up the sniper, you might go on with, "Like in this case. Washington DC is a very long way from here. It would take us several days to drive that far in the car." Or if they're talking about the airplane terrorism, you can talk specifically about the safety measures the government is putting into place. Things like, "Even the president is appointing the very best people he can think of to work on this. And a whole year later, they've been able to keep us safe from one single airplane being hijacked."

Most important of all is to be honest with your child. That doesn't mean you have to tell them everything about how you feel and what you fear, but it does mean that you don't make them promises you can't keep. We can't say, "That will never happen in our state." What we can say is something like, "It is happening in Washington DC, which is all the way across the country."

The younger the child, the more their messages of fears and troubling thoughts will manifest in their behaviors. Even with older youth, if they're fearful, they may seem to be clingy or stay a little closer. Some may have difficulty sleeping. It is fine to let kids leave on a night light or

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bring a sleeping bag into your room so they aren't so far away. In New York, a surprising number of high school students are still sleeping in their parents' bedrooms more than a year after the attacks.

Some students may be reluctant to go to school or be separated from parents. It is important to be both understanding and gentle, yet matter-of-fact. You may be a long way from a particular danger, but it may take some extra indulgences to help kids gain a sense of security. Depending on the age of child, consider walking them to the school bus or taking them to school for a few days, or letting them call you at work during the day to check in. If we once let kids stay home out of fear, it becomes difficult to get them back into school the longer we wait. Better to find a solution that both comforts them and keeps them engaged in activities.

When kids are upset, it is helpful to keep routines. If you can, wait to introduce changes until they're back on more confident grounds.

It is perfectly acceptable for parent or adult to say, "I don't know," when that is the truth. More than having the right answer, kids want to sense integrity or truth between what we say and what our innards seem to be telling them! Kids pick up body language when we're trying to "cover" far better than we sometimes think.

When we talk about the specifics of something like a sniper attack, it helps for us to point out to children that many, many people get angry, yell or act out. But this person has a very, very sick mind, and this is very unusual. Point out that we've never ever had anything quite like this happen before, and that when this person is caught, he will never, ever be out of prison. We already know he will be locked up for life.

Often adults think that, once kids are in bed or out of the room, they're free to talk about their fears without impacting the children. It is crucial that we monitor our own fears and talk about them when we really are entirely out of earshot of our children. It is fine to be honest with them that we have fears, such as, "Sometimes I worry about things like that, too." But it is helpful to follow that up with how you cope. "But I remind myself that this is happening a very long way from here."

Children's fears are exacerbated by television coverage. Monitor your viewing and protect kids from seeing sensational coverage. They'll hear enough from friends and others, and if you keep them talking about this with you, it gives you the chance to also give them reassurances.

Rather than telling them why they should feel safe, take the time to explore with them what would help them feel safe. It might be locking doors and windows, or it might be something you'd never guess. Often we adults think that we know what will help them feel better, and actually, since it is the child's fear, the child also really has the likely solution.

Spend extra time with kids doing fun things and talking about great things that are happening. For every bit of time you spend talking about the sniper or 9/11, spend five times that much talking about or doing things you all enjoy. Don't lose sight of how good life is!

For younger children, there is a terrific book out by Nancy Carlson, titled There's a Big Beautiful World Out There! It is actually a book that schools in New York have used this fall; it was provided to every elementary school in District Two, lower Manhattan.

The important reassurance for our children is to know that we get through these times by coming together as families and communities. There is a wonderful Irish Proverb that says, "We all really live in the shelter of one another." Now more than ever, this is so true!



Helping Children with Fears About the Sniper Attacks

Thoughts for School Staff and Parents

- Realize that the American psyche has been changed by the events of 9/11, and although this event is fundamentally different, we all still feel somewhat destabilized by fear-evoking events and circumstances
- It is more important for children and youth to talk to us than for us to rush in with reassurances. Ask them what troubles them, but resist the temptation to immediately give them our advice or solutions – first communicate your understanding of their fear.
- Always be honest. Don't whitewash, don't deny or minimize. When the child has had a chance to tell their fears, give honest reassurances, and move the discussion into hopeful terms, working together on solutions.
- Watch their behaviors as indicators of their level of fear or comfort. If kids seem clingy or insecure, it is fine to let them sleep in your room for a few nights or leave on a night-light.
- Avoid letting children stay home from school or activities out of fear. Once this pattern is in place, it can be difficult to overcome. Far better to come up with measures that give them a sense of confidence to bridge them through their time of fear. Walk them to school or to the bus. Let them check in with you during the day or call you at work.
- Keep routines as much as possible during times of stress.
- Reassure youth that the sniper is *very, very sick* in his mind, and help them recognize that this is extremely unusual. We've never had anyone do this ever in our history, and when he is caught, he will never ever be out of prison. Help them realize that, although all of us feel anger at times, nearly everyone has good impulse control and a sense of empathy toward other human beings that keeps us from doing dangerous things.
- Monitor television and limit exposure to coverage of this and other frightening events. Far better that they get this kind of information from you in discussion than watch the sensationalism that national media often uses.
- Be sure you're dealing with your fears out of earshot from your children. We often don't think they're listening once they go to bed, but that is often when they're paying the most attention! Deal with your fears with other adults at times when your children won't hear.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know" when that is the honest answer! Children don't need our answers as much as they need the reassurances that we'll continue to love and support them, which is how we all get through these kind of things.
- Help them come up with what will help them feel safe rather than trying to foist your own ideas on them. Often, their needs are simpler than we might think.
- Spend extra time with your kids, and have the predominant time be on positive topics or doing something fun. Keep in focus how very wonderful life really is! Go on a bike ride with your child. Do something outside that *isn't* going to the mall. Find ways and times to talk about things that are positive. Read together. Play. Be silly. Create surprises.
- For elementary aged kids, get Nancy Carlson's book [There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There](#). This is a terrific book, and was provided for all schools in District Two, lower Manhattan, for the beginning of the school year. It is so very hopeful.
- Remind kids... and remind yourselves.... There is a wonderful Irish proverb, and it is so true... "We all really live in the shelter of one another." Now more than ever, this is so true.

Cheri Lovre
Director
Crisis Management Institute
PO Box 331
Salem, OR 97308
www.cmionline.org
clovre@earthlink.net

