



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

School Shooting Talksheet for Parents of Teenagers

Students in middle school and high school have never known a world without school shootings, as the Columbine shooting happened before many of them were born (April 20, 1999). Metal detectors, locked doors, on site police officers, and lockdowns have become a standard way of life at school for teens. Regardless, when something this tragic happens in our nation, adults are faced with the aftermath of scared, concerned, angry, confused kids. As followers of Jesus, we know that we have hope, even in times of hopelessness. And in a world who is asking for action and policy reform instead of thoughts and prayers, we may wonder, "Where is God in all of this?"

God shows up in emergency responders, in educators who selflessly protect students, in the communities that rally together and support each other. So, as parents, as a community, be encouraged to shine the light of Jesus into these dark situations. Love people well. Be kind and compassionate. Be careful in how you speak and treat others. And teach your children how to do likewise.

Here's some collected resources from Psychologists, educators, and parenting experts (sources below) to help you have this conversation with your kids. May God bless you as you engage in these difficult, but necessary, conversations with your family.

1. Parents should initiate a conversation

Gurwitch, a member of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, stressed that in situations like this, it is "extremely important" for parents and caregivers – especially those with children in high school – to "be willing to bring this topic up."³

"We really want to wrap our arms around them and make them feel safe," she added. "But part of being a parent is willingness to discuss difficult topics."³

Gurwitch suggests that if you are watching the news with your children, turn it off and talk about the events calmly in order to get an idea of what they know, where they are coming from, and what misconceptions they may have already heard.³

Assure your child that they are safe, but don't make promises you can't keep.⁵

Psychologists who work in the area of trauma and recovery advise parents to use the troubling news of school shootings as an opportunity to talk and listen to their children. It is important, say these psychologists, to be honest. Parents should acknowledge to children that bad things do happen, but also reassure them with the information that many people are working to keep them safe, including their parents, teachers and local police.¹

It is also critical to reassure children that parents and adults at their school "are going to do everything we can to make you safe," Gurwitch added.

"Let them know that their school has plans in place to do everything to the best of their ability to make them safe," she said.³

2. Talk about the school and your family's plan

Talk with students about what a lockdown would look like at their school. Talk about how you would communicate as a family – likely via cell phone – but what would happen if you couldn't get a hold of each other. Who are other trusted adults they can call or text? How would your son/daughter communicate if they were in danger, or to let you know they are safe? Remind your son/daughter to remain calm and prayerful, trusting God with their fear and anxiety in the moment.

If your child or teen says they do not feel safe going back to school, Gurwitch emphasized that it is important not to invalidate their feelings, but to talk about them.³

"Say, 'Tell me what it is that you're worried about? What it is that you don't feel safe about?'" she said. "Validate why your child may not feel safe, if we just discount it with a throwaway, 'You are going to be fine,' we shut down the conversation."³

Gurwitch added that you can reassure your child that "nowadays schools do have safety plans, and schools do practice shooting drills."³

"Some people are concerned about practicing these drills, but it's like fire drills, it doesn't make kids more scared that fires are going to break out, it makes students feel more secure that they have a plan in place," she said.³

"Be patient and supportive as children are trying to make sense of how something so horrific can happen at a setting where I go to be with friends, to learn," she added.³

3. Students are "seeing" more than ever before

Technology has allowed the public to witness mass shootings in new and terrifying ways. The students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School used their cellphones and social media accounts in real time to share their experiences and spread messages of pain, anger and gratitude, as well as calls to action.²

We are seeing more and more firsthand accounts and videos of tragedy, delivered by way of social media instead of news sources. Often, these include disturbing images, or the emotionally charged commentary of teens filming. This changes the reality for teen viewers, making them much closer to the tragedy – seeing that that could've been *their* school, *their* friends.

Ask your students:

What are your reactions to firsthand accounts of the violence that took place in Parkland, Florida? Do you think the fact that your generation is so fluent in social media gives you a voice previous generations did not have? What might be the benefits and drawbacks of that if so? Or, does the oversaturation of these videos and images make you more *detached* from the situation?²

4. Does this impact how we treat others?

We will never understand all the underlying reasons someone would commit a school shooting. But we do understand that all humans need care, love, affection, and everyone has a desire to be

seen and heard. Use these moments to remind your child how important it is to be kind to everyone, to be careful with words, not spread gossip, and don't harass or bully others. We are so careless with how we treat others, this is an important time to talk about how we shine the love of Jesus into everyone we meet. And that we have a responsibility to not be part of the problem.

Also, encourage your child to notice their peers who may need counseling or help and don't be scared to talk to a teacher, counselor, or trusted adult about those individuals.

5. Check back in

"I think that it is really important to check back in tomorrow, to check back in the next day, to find out what are your friends talking about related to this school shooting," Gurwitch said. "It is very important to get an understanding of how children are coping."³

"When there is a tragedy...a one-and-done conversation is not sufficient," she added. "Let your child or teenager know that 'I really do care about you and I am open to having this discussion.'"³

Most children are quite resilient and will return to their normal activities and personality relatively quickly, but parents should be alert to any signs of anxiety that might suggest that a child or teenager might need more assistance. Such indicators could be a change in the child's school performance, changes in relationships with peers and teachers, excessive worry, school refusal, sleeplessness, nightmares, headaches or stomachaches, or loss of interest in activities that the child used to enjoy. If these symptoms persist, reach out to their school guidance counselor, a local psychological association or even their pediatrician for further help.¹

Sources:

1. *Talking to your children about the recent spate of school shootings*, American Psychological Association: <http://www.apa.org/topics/violence/school-shooting.aspx>
2. *Resources for talking and teaching about the school shooting in Florida* (Prolux, N., & Shulten, K.), New York Times, February 15, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/learning/lesson-plans/resources-for-talking-and-teaching-about-the-school-shooting-in-florida.html>
3. *How to talk to your kids and teens about school shootings*, ABC News, February 15, 2018: <http://abc13.com/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-and-teens-about-school-shootings-/3087787/>
4. *How to talk to children about shootings: An age-by-age guide* (Holohan, M.), February 14, 2018, Today: <https://www.today.com/parents/how-talk-children-about-shootings-age-age-guide-t59626>
5. *What mental health experts say to their kids about school shootings* (Spector, N.), NBC News – Better, February 14, 2018: <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/how-mental-health-experts-talk-their-kids-about-school-shootings-ncna845586>