

15 February 2018

Dear Families and Staff of MSAD No. 75;

The news of yet another school shooting heightens our fears and anxiety about the safety of children everywhere, including here in MSAD No. 75. No school system can take the risk of assuming it could never happen here. In our school system, student safety and emergency response has been one of our highest priorities.

While some younger children may not even be aware of the incident in Florida, older students are talking, texting and posting on social media. Be aware that such information is often inaccurate or speculation. Nevertheless, we take any and all reports very seriously and cooperate fully with our local law enforcement agencies. We are currently unable to verify any specific threats to our high school or any of our schools.

Our high school administration has been following up on information and concerns expressed to them throughout the day. They have been communicating with Topsham Police Department. Both Mrs. Brunette (MTA Principal) and I have spoken directly with Chief Lewis, and will continue to sort through information and take any additional steps that may be necessary. The Chief has already decided to provide additional officer presence at the high school tomorrow, which we hope will bring some sense of comfort and reassurance to parents, students and staff.

Every school has an emergency plan, and every school practices that plan. Our administrators meet on a frequent basis with law enforcement officials from Cumberland County, Sagadahoc County and Topsham Police. Our emergency plans have been developed with them, and are reviewed and revised annually.

Your children are surrounded by caring adults in and out of school! We have dedicated members of law enforcement who rise to the challenge in difficult times. And students can help keep schools safe by treating everyone with respect and dignity.

Attached is a PDF from the National Association of School Psychologists that may be helpful as you prepare to talk with your child about school violence. Two additional websites are provided. While not endorsing any of these organizations, they are given in hopes they can be helpful to you.

I encourage you to talk, if age appropriate, with your child(ren) about school safety. Students who know information first hand should report it. Please make certain your child is responsible in their use of social media, knowing that inaccurate or inflammatory information makes ensuring student safety even more difficult. However, if you or your child have direct knowledge, please be certain that it is reported to either law enforcement or school officials. We will follow up!

Mrs. Brunette is preparing a message for high school families, and that will be posted later this evening with an auto call to high school parents.

If anything changes, we will let you know. In the meantime, keep those who are suffering in your thoughts, and reassure your child(ren) that schools are safe, even if bad things happen sometimes.

Respectfully,

Brad Smith
Superintendent

Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers

High profile acts of violence, particularly in schools, can confuse and frighten children who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved-ones are at risk. They will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security and talking with them about their fears.

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
2. **Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.
3. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
 - **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
 - **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
 - **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.
4. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.
5. **Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and

time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

6. **Limit television viewing of these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.
7. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- Schools are safe places. School staff works with parents and public safety providers (local police and fire departments, emergency responders, hospitals, etc.) to keep you safe.
- The school building is safe because ... (cite specific school procedures).
- We all play a role in the school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened.
- There is a difference between reporting, tattling or gossiping. You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the **possibility** of something happening and **probability** that it will affect you (our school community).
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying about the event.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
- Stay away from guns and other weapons. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.

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