

Developing a Safe School Environment



Research has found four common themes in schools where shootings occurred:

1. An inflexible culture:
 - a. An inflexible culture consists of official and unofficial patterns of behaviors and the relationships that are associated with these behaviors and values.
 - b. Becomes insensitive to changes in society and may unknowingly cause a sense of not belonging in certain students.
 - c. Creates a “they-and-we” view of the school; it creates outsiders.
2. Inequitable discipline:
 - a. Inequitable discipline exists when school staff members apply school rules differently to one group or another.
 - b. Such unfair discipline practices can intensify an outsider-view. For example, if certain students believe that athletes are not punished as harshly as they are, these students may become resentful and have contempt for the school and its personnel.
3. Disrespectful behavior:
 - a. If a school permits or is believed to permit disrespectful behavior such as bullying, racism, and overt rudeness, the students bearing the brunt of

such actions may feel they have no one to turn to—especially if they are aware that the school’s policies on such behavior are very lenient.

4. Code of silence:
 - a. A code of silence exists when students refuse to report important information about other students.
 - b. The motivation for such secrecy is the fear of being labeled a “snitch” and ostracized by other students.
 - c. The word “snitching” should be reframed to “helping.” Snitching involves telling on someone to get them in trouble, whereas helping would involve reporting one’s concerns in order to help the person or others.

There are five important domains that must be considered when working to create safe schools:

1. Expected student behaviors:
 - a. Develop a clear definition of how students are expected to behave.
 - b. For the students, the topics that should be covered include clear limits on unacceptable behaviors (including bullying

- and disrespectful behavior) and the definition of understandable consequences and clear conduct guidelines to be followed.
- c. For the staff, the emphasis should be on equitably enforcing behavior guidelines; seriously addressing all rumors; and promoting leadership and physical safety.
2. Skills instruction:
 - a. Teach students important skills such as: effective communication; decision-making; problem-solving; and conflict resolution.
 - b. They should also be taught the principles of how to cooperate with others; self-control; and building friendships.
 - c. Since school staff is critical in fostering school safety they should be taught crisis management techniques.
 3. Engagement with the community:
 - a. Encouraging extracurricular activities that promote interaction with the local citizenry helps establish a necessary bond between the school and the community.
 - b. Encourage schools to stress social, emotional and ethical learning to increase student self/other awareness.
 - c. Encourage schools to develop forums and focus groups to encourage parents to express their views and concerns.
 4. Positive adult interactions:
 - a. Develop positive adult interactions with all students, in part, to marginalize any code of silence that could facilitate a school rampage.
 - b. The staff, as confident authority figures, should provide positive role models for students; in doing so, they must demonstrate warmth and a positive interest in the students as individuals.
 - c. While all teachers may not be able to relate equally well to all students, there should be some member of the staff for any type of student.
 5. Student self/other awareness:
 - a. Teachers and staff should receive at least some specialized training in recognizing emotional and social problems in students.
 - b. Particular attention should be paid to students who have made threats toward other students and/or the general school population; those who may seem depressed, perpetually angry or isolated and rejected; those whose behavior and/or school performance has changed abruptly; those suffering a major loss or traumatic event.

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