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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Not Safe Here

Does she like me?

Why hasn't he texted back?

When was that paper due again?

Am I going to get shot today?

School shootings aren't a new phenomenon in America—the first recorded instance of gun violence in a school dates [as far back as 1840](#). But they've never felt so terribly present.

Since the [Columbine massacre](#) in 1999, the threat of a classmate coming to school with a gun has loomed larger and larger in the minds of teenagers. And after the [Sandy Hook massacre](#) in 2012, even first-graders know on some level that catching the bus in the morning might be the last time they see their family. Schools prepare children for the threat of a gunman by way of unannounced drills, intending to equip students but succeeding mostly in [traumatizing them](#). Kids must know about the nearest exits, how to shelter in place, how to identify where the sound of gunfire originated so they can run the other way. They mull over what they'll text their parents and siblings if they're caught in a closet and hear footsteps down the hall.

Unfortunately, school shootings are a very American problem since the U.S. has [57 times as many](#) school shootings as the other major industrial nations combined. And with [82 recorded incidents](#), 2018 was the worst year for school shootings in America; the runner-up year is 2006, with 59. But those numbers don't begin to reflect how huge and suffocating the issue *feels*. Between our constant news cycle, an unending argument about gun laws, and our pocket-sized access to the worst possible news at any given moment, school gun violence is never that far away. We are aware of the threat at all times, viscerally if not consciously.

As agonizing as this constant worry is for parents, it's just as bad for kids: They are even more powerless in the face of gun violence, and they're still developing emotionally and psychologically. Teenagers have always thought they were invincible; but this generation knows they're not.

The reminder of their mortality is made all the more unnerving because they know that the threat is not external—they don't fear a Cold War turning hot, and they're not haunted by the specter of plane hijackers. Their danger is local, personal, intimate; they could die at the hands of someone they sat next to in Algebra 1.

Even if this anxiety isn't manifesting in your teen's life right now, that doesn't mean they're not experiencing it—and it will certainly come to mind when they hear about the next school shooting, and the next, and the next, and the next. (That more school shootings will happen seems to be the one thing no one argues about.)

So how can we help them deal with this fear when it arrives?

— Step 1: Learn

If we're going to help our teens cope with stories of school shootings, our first job is to

understand their context and perspective. It's cliché to point out how different our kids' lives are from how we grew up, but fearing that one of your classmates might try to kill you is especially alien to us. Because of that, we have extra homework.

We can start by listening not just to our kids, but to their peers—particularly the ones who have [lived through a school shooting](#). These [survivors' stories](#) offer a deep understanding of the fear that weighs on our teens; they're a window, peering past statistics and political arguments into a terrifying lived experience. The first step to helping someone is empathy, and reading these stories can help us develop that.

We should also ask good questions. The statistics mentioned earlier should make us pause and ask, what exactly about our culture is leading to this specific problem? What hasn't been done to protect our children from future attacks? Are we willing to do whatever it takes to keep our kids safe? Or are we just hoping against hope that one day the carnage will end on its own? By asking these and similar questions, we'll open our own hearts to tackling the issue from its root, even if makes us uncomfortable.

— Step 2: Talk with Someone Else

The reality of school shootings weighs heavily on parents and kids alike. If the first time you talk about it is with your teen, even if you try to support them through their fears, you'll be unloading your own onto them. You'll both end up in a pernicious feedback loop.

Mental health professionals [recommend](#) that parents establish their own support systems before trying to help their teen. It's the psychological equivalent of putting on your own oxygen mask before trying to assist others. Talk through your own fears with a spouse, friend, or pastor; pray; as much as possible, be at peace in your own soul before trying to tend to another's.

Don't discount the importance of this step. Even Jesus took time away from His ministry to sort Himself out and settle His spirit. If God Himself needed time to process and recuperate before He could help others, we can't expect to do better than that.

— Step 3: Listen

When you have a good idea of how teens feel and have set up ways for you to sort through your own anxieties, you can then start looking for opportunities to talk about the reality of school shootings with your teen. Do so gently; it's unlikely that your student will be enthusiastic to talk about something so unnerving. Invite them to air any questions or feelings they've been having around the issue. Above all, your goal is to show that you're willing to listen and to give them a chance to speak.

This doesn't need to be a dour, scheduled sit-down. If you already have a consistent, casual sharing time with your teen (whether it be no-phone time at dinner, the drive to school, or some other ritual), you can enter into this topic there, where they already feel safe to share.

If you don't have such a practice, consider starting one—though remember that the first several times will be awkward for all involved, until you're all used to sharing with one another. Make it a habit, and make it clear that your teen can bring anything to these conversations: fears, mistakes, embarrassments.

— Step 4: Keep Listening

This step could just as easily be labeled *resist the urge to stop the conversation prematurely*. The fact is, the topic of school gun violence makes us tremendously uncomfortable, and it can be agonizing to let it linger. It's tempting to alleviate that discomfort (both in others and ourselves) by quoting a verse or a platitude:

Remember that even if you die, you'll go to heaven.

God is in control.

The Lord is our shepherd.

Do not be anxious about anything; you should pray about it.

Here's the problem: All of these statements are true, but in this context, they might do more harm than good. If we're using true statements about God to avoid talking about something uncomfortable, we're not *really* talking about God; we're just using His name and reputation to shield ourselves from something we don't want to deal with.

Kids can smell evasion tactics a mile away. And if they've grown up in the Church, regurgitated truisms about God's protection will ring particularly hollow. Even worse, doing this will tell your kids that you're *not* actually safe to talk to; they'll keep their fears to themselves because they don't want to make you uncomfortable.

Letting the conversation continue and resisting the urge to cap it neatly with a Bible verse will communicate to your teen that you're willing to stay beside them no matter what. It's an opportunity to reassure them that even if neither of you can make the world safe, there is at least a refuge *here*, in the space between you and them.

So, if you find yourself wanting to share a verse, *wait*. Not forever—the very next step, in fact, is to share the things that comfort you. But it's important to hit pause and ask yourself: Am I trying to curb my own feelings, or, is this the right time to offer help? Should I encourage them to keep speaking, or is it my turn to talk?

— Step 5: Reassure

Once you're confident that your teen has said as much as they want, it's your turn to share things that have been helpful to you—even while knowing that they may not be helpful to your teen.

This is an important distinction. Framing your reassurances as a solution for your teen's fear puts a lot of pressure on them to be "cured" of it after you've talked. So if they still feel that fear afterward, they feel that something is wrong with them; and now we've not only failed to comfort them but compounded their dismay with feelings of guilt and

insufficiency. Be explicit in admitting that what comforts you might not comfort them, and that's okay.

Keeping that in mind, you can remind them that there are many, many people working hard to keep them safe, from their teachers and administrators all the way to security personnel. Offer stories of times you've felt afraid or Scripture you find particularly reassuring. Be honest about how much comfort you draw from your faith in Christ—whether it calms you completely or not. Authenticity is of more value than bravado.

Last, be wary of making false promises, or of promoting a warped sense of who God is. We cannot, for instance, promise that God will protect His children specifically from school violence; many victims of school shootings have been Christians.

If you're struggling to find words of reassurance, here are some examples to get you started. You can share these with your teen for them to read on their own when they're ready, or offer to read them together:

- *When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.* (Psalm 56:3)
- *Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid.* (John 14:27)
- *When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.* (Psalm 94:19)
- *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* (Psalm 23:4)
- *Humble yourselves, then, under God's mighty hand, so that he will lift you up in his own good time. Leave all your worries with him, because he cares for you.* (1 Peter 5:6-7)
- *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8:38-39)
- *You who fear him, trust in the LORD—he is their help and shield.* (Psalm 115:11)
- *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.* (Deuteronomy 31:6)
- *For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.* (Isaiah 41:13)

— Step 6: Empower

Up to now, we've only discussed ways to manage the fear instilled by school gun violence. But your teen might wonder aloud: Is there anything that can be *done*? Maybe they heard how the Parkland shooting survivors—their peers—[became outspoken gun-control activists](#) after the tragedy and began wondering if they should do the same. Or perhaps they've simply started wondering why school shootings are on the rise and if

they can fix what's not working anymore.

What this highlights is that, regardless of our own stances, **we need to have the gun control conversation with our kids**, *even if it means they might come to a different conclusion than we hope*. If we don't have the conversation with them, someone else (their friends, teachers, pastors, people on social media, the news media) will...and probably already are. So we need to be ready to calmly and lovingly go on a fact-finding journey with them, to consider different scenarios, and to guide them with good questions.

For example, Australia has by and large [stopped mass shootings](#) by banning semi-automatic and military-style rifles. Take some time to look at the data with your teen and ask: If such measures would hypothetically end school shootings in the US, would you support them? Why or why not? What other ramifications might the measures have? Then, consider the opposite solution proposed by some: Will arming teachers curb the violence? Why or why not? What other ramifications might that decision have? In addition, others believe the media is to blame for the incessant violence we consume on a daily basis via movies, streaming TV, and video games, so would changing our media fix the problem? Help them think beyond political parties and biases to figure out what the heart of the problem is. What would solve that? What solutions might only be addressing symptoms, rather than the source?

As you have this ongoing conversation, remind them that the most powerful tool at our disposal is prayer—not passive prayer, but prayer with hands and feet attached to it. [Pope Francis wisely said](#), “You pray for the hungry, then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.” Throughout Scripture, God reminds us that if our prayers are a cop out for actually doing something, He will not listen: “[When you spread out](#) your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!” Strong words from a strong God who demands we join Him in actively rooting out evil politically, socially, and communally.

The fundamental hope of prayer is that God first and foremost hears us, then will act in the real world to bring about His desires. So we must teach our teens to pray and join Him in the physical steps necessary to bring peace into a violent world. Teach them to ask God to calm and comfort them, to give them strength, to help them be brave, and to give them discernment. Also, encourage them to pray for the wisdom to know what to do. Oftentimes, prayer gives us fresh eyes to see where God is already at work in our world.

Being the hands and feet of Jesus means becoming a light in the darkness. Encourage your teens to seek out the marginalized, hurting, and broken, and to love them well. Raise them to have the courage to befriend an at-risk student, to protect them from bullying or isolation, and to look at others as humans, no matter how repulsive, mean, offensive, or offputting they may be. Show them how kids overwhelmed and/or frustrated by their situations often push people away (in whatever manner) as a defense mechanism. Help them think of ways to reach out to their classmates with simple acts of humanity and show them that someone is on their side.

Yes, school shooters commit great evil—but they are also divine image bearers who have more than likely been victims of real evil themselves. We may never know how many teenagers have considered acts of violence at one point or another but did not ultimately go through with it because someone reached out to them in their darkness, like someone did for [Aaron Stark](#). As he says in his TEDx Talk, “When someone treats you like a person when you don’t even feel like you’re human, it’ll change your entire world.”

Doing these things—engaging in conversation about difficult topics like gun control, modeling what it means to be the hands and feet of Christ, and helping our teens see beyond the exterior to the image bearer underneath—not only offers our teens practical ways to engage the world and not feel like helpless victims, it also just may offer their suffering peers a path out of darkness and back into supportive, healing community *before* any irrevocable damage is done.

Finally, train your children to pay attention to any students who may have an unhealthy relationship with guns. If they notice one of their peers has an obsession with guns, empower them to inform a teacher. Even more important is to take seriously when an individual tells others of a plan to kill or harm. Whether they see something on social media or overhear a conversation in the bathroom, equip them with a plan of action to report their findings immediately. You may also want to encourage them to get involved in public policy conversations or in educating their peers about mental health issues.

— Discussion Questions

- What have you heard about school shootings?
- Do you think it's something that could happen at your school?
- Do you feel like you're safe at school?
- Are you ever afraid to go to school?
- Do you think about school shootings a lot? Do these thoughts ever keep you from sleeping?
- Has your school done an “active shooter drill” yet? If so, how did it make you feel?
- Do the stories about school shootings make you feel frightened or anxious?
- What do your friends say about school shootings?
- Do you think it's possible to prevent school shootings? Why/why not?
- If you do think it's possible, how do you think it can be done? *(Note: Be willing to listen to their answers, even if they don't align with what you believe. Also, don't try to convince them of your position; rather, simply ask good questions and allow them to ask good questions of your beliefs, too.)*
- What would you do if a friend/classmate said something about committing an act of violence at school?
- Have you ever noticed someone who was alone, being made fun of, or bullied? What did you do?
- How can you be a source of light and hope at your school?
- How can you encourage others to be kind and compassionate?

— Conclusion

It can't be overstated how much courage is needed to have this conversation. No parent wants to think about their children dying, much less talk to them about it—but, frankly, the secret is out. Pretending our kids are still ignorant will not make them any safer or more able to cope with their feelings.

Providing a space for them to talk to you can lift that burden off of them, just a little bit. It's as much as we can do for now; as long as school shootings continue, we can't fully protect our kids, either from the possibility that they'll be names on the news tomorrow or from the fear of that reality. But we can offer refuge, a safe place for them to admit how they feel. We can offer all the comfort we have, both as their parents and as people who believe that death has lost its sting. And we can encourage our kids to emulate Jesus by loving the outcast, marginalized, and hard to love, even in the face of fear and the unknown. Who knows? Our kids might just be the difference someone needs.

— Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Depression & Anxiety](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to \(Cyber\)Bullying](#)
- A Parent's Guide to Worrying & Fear (coming soon to [axis.org/guides](#))
- Anxiety Conversation Kit (coming soon to [virtual.axis.org](#))

If you'd like access to all of our resources, both current and yet to come, for one low monthly or yearly price, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

— Additional Resources

- ["School Shootings and Other Traumatic Events: How to Talk to Students,"](#) NEA
- ["Talking to Children about Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers,"](#) National Association of School Psychologists
- ["Talking to Your Children about the Recent Spate of School Shootings,"](#) APA
- ["Tips for Talking to Students about a School Shooting,"](#) Psych Central
- ["What Mental Health Experts Say to Their Kids about School Shootings,"](#) NBC News
- ["How to Talk to Children about Shootings: An Age-by-Age Guide,"](#) The Today Show
- ["Active-Shooter Drills Are Tragically Misguided,"](#) The Atlantic
- ["I Was Almost a School Shooter,"](#) Aaron Stark, TEDx Talk

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