

# Five Questions

## For School Staff To Ask When Preparing For An Active Shooter Drill

Tips And Resources For Building A Trauma-Informed Active Shooter Drill In Schools

WHEN

### [1] What is the plan for providing advance notice of drills?

Research is clear that “surprise” drills of this nature are traumatic and can exacerbate harm to students already coping with a trauma history. Most guidance on this issue recommends ensuring that students know about any active shooter drill prior to the beginning of the drill, so that students are never in the circumstance of questioning where an actual shooter event is occurring or not. Failure to announce these drills in advance has led to outcomes, such as causing children to genuinely fear for their lives, which is the precise definition of traumatization.

This [article](#) in NBC News summarized several drills around the country in which children would: “send what they believe are final goodbyes over text to their parents or faint or throw up. Others are afraid to go to school in the days following the drills”. This article and others cover the benefits of the drills as well but emphasize the need to avoid unnecessary traumatization by providing advance notice.

*“Administrators err when they think they must familiarize students with the sound of real gun fire or use scare tactics to get them to take drills seriously, Schildkraut said. Those practices don’t take into account students’ personal histories with trauma or exposure to gun violence in their communities.”*

—from Education Week, 6/9/2022 (by Evie Bland)

“I would love to live in a world where we did not need these [drills], but that’s not the world we live in,” said Jaclyn Schildkraut, an associate professor of criminal justice at the State University of New York at Oswego who studies mass shootings and school drills. “So how can we do them in a way that is both trauma-informed, and also delivering the skills that students need to have in these moments?”

—from Education Week, 6/9/2022 (author: Evie Bland)

WHAT

### [2] How has the school and/or district prepared staff, students and parents to know when a drill is occurring and how to support children to manage their anxiety?

The National Association of School Psychologists released a [detailed statement](#) urging schools to consider best practices when developing drill protocols:

*“Being clear on the differences in these drill types and how to mitigate unnecessary negative consequences helps decision-makers focus on the appropriate drills for the purpose and participants intended, ultimately safeguarding the physical and psychological safety of all students and staff.”*

—National Association of School Psychologists

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WHO

### [3] How will staff help students “debrief” each drill experience so that everyone involved can process their emotions around the experience?

Momentous Institute created short guidance on both the rational and specific strategies that educators can use to support children in processing their fears around school violence.

*When we feel overwhelmed with a big emotion, it can surface in different ways. If you find yourself easily snapping at others, extra tired, wanting to withdraw or having trouble sleeping... these may be a sign that you are having an emotional response before you even notice it.”*

—Momentous Institute

Conducting active shooter drills without processing the experience and giving children a chance to express their feelings can unnecessarily lead to the development of trauma response symptoms. A debriefing process can reduce the risk of this kind of lingering harm. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network includes a [step by step debrief](#) guide. These steps are reprinted below for convenience; however, the entire document is a useful resource for better understanding the elements of a trauma-informed approach to these drills. The resource describes the debrief process for staff and parents as well:

#### Debrief Process for Students – excerpted from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- Identify a staff member to check in with all students with known trauma and loss histories to assess whether the plan worked well or if adjustments are needed.
- Praise students on specific actions they took to care for themselves and fellow students.
- Encourage staff to inform guidance or administration of students who had difficulties during the drill and create a plan with them for future drills.
- Remind these students to keep practicing calming/coping skills for a day or two after the drill as it takes time for our bodies to calm down.
- Provide a mental health referral for students who are still struggling a week after the drill.
- Review attendance to determine if any students did not come to school to avoid the drill. Make a plan for how they can participate next time.

WHY

### [4] How does your school’s drill plan reflect research-based resources to build emotionally and psychologically safe active shooter drills?

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has created a helpful [fact sheet/checklist](#) for this purpose, focusing on steps to take before, during and after an active shooter drill.

#### Important questions to consider include:

- Have staff become familiarized with students’ trauma histories, anxiety levels and coping capacity?
- How can the school help build students’ coping capacity in general as part of a trauma-informed approach to schooling, so that during active shooter drills, students already have a toolkit of strategies to draw from?

Review the [fact sheet](#) for guidance on answering these questions in ways that best support students.

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### HOW

**[5] Utilize, or hire, mental health professionals to support the week of the scheduled drills, to provide expertise that informs the protocol as well as to provide emotional support before, during and after these events.**

Research has demonstrated that active shooter drills have a long lasting impact on students:

*“Results revealed that social media posts displayed a 42% increase in anxiety and stress from pre- to post-drills (as evidenced by an increase in such words as afraid, struggling, and nervous) and a 39% increase in depression (evidenced by words such as therapy, cope, irritability, suicidal) following drills. This trend was sustained at least 90 days following drills and spanned diverse school districts and drill tactics.”*

—Everytown USA

Ensuring access to professional mental and emotional health support is essential to any active shooter drill protocol.

#### Read more here:

##### ■ [Creating School Active Shooter/Intruder Drills](#)

This fact sheet by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network describes a detailed trauma-informed protocol that schools can follow to design emotionally and psychologically safe active school shooter drills.

##### ■ [Managing Emotions Around School Violence: A Guide for Educators](#)

This article describes exercises that can be used to help calm anxiety related to school violence.

##### ■ [School Shooter Drills: Is There a Right Way to Do Them?](#)

This article describes research and state laws that guide schools on how to conduct trauma-informed active shooter drills.

##### ■ [Active shooter drills are scaring kids and may not protect them. Some schools are taking a new approach](#)

This article describes the benefits as well as the potential harm of active shooter drills in schools. Safer, more trauma-informed approaches are highlighted, as well as some of the policy barriers to implementing these alternatives.

##### ■ [NASP and NASRO Urge Accuracy With Regard to Lockdown Versus Other Types of Armed Assailant Drills](#)

This statement was prepared by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) with the goal to educate schools and communities that “Skills development and preparedness are critical, but these goals can be accomplished without inflicting psychological harm on students or staff.” The brief provides descriptions of risks and benefits of active shooter drills in schools, and makes recommendations for best practices.

##### ■ [The Impact of Active Shooter Drills in Schools](#)

This report reviews research conducted at Everytown USA to understand the impact of active shooter drills on the emotional well-being of young people, and includes recommendations for how to address the threat of school violence in a way that does not cause long term emotional, mental and psychological damage.

“In a 2022 study that summarized her findings, Schildkraut attributed that response to “protection motivation theory,” which suggests that “in order for people to engage in protective behavior, they have to perceive that there is some kind of threat.”

In other words, learning about why drills are necessary made students more aware of potential dangers, she said. But that motivation can come through a careful discussion, Schildkraut insisted, and students don’t need dramatic theatrics to take preparation seriously. ...

...She particularly condemned “sensorial experiences,” like actors and the sounds of screaming, which are not backed by research.”

—from Education Week, 6/9/2022  
(Evie Bland)