

Deer caught in the headlight!

Addressing safety in schools

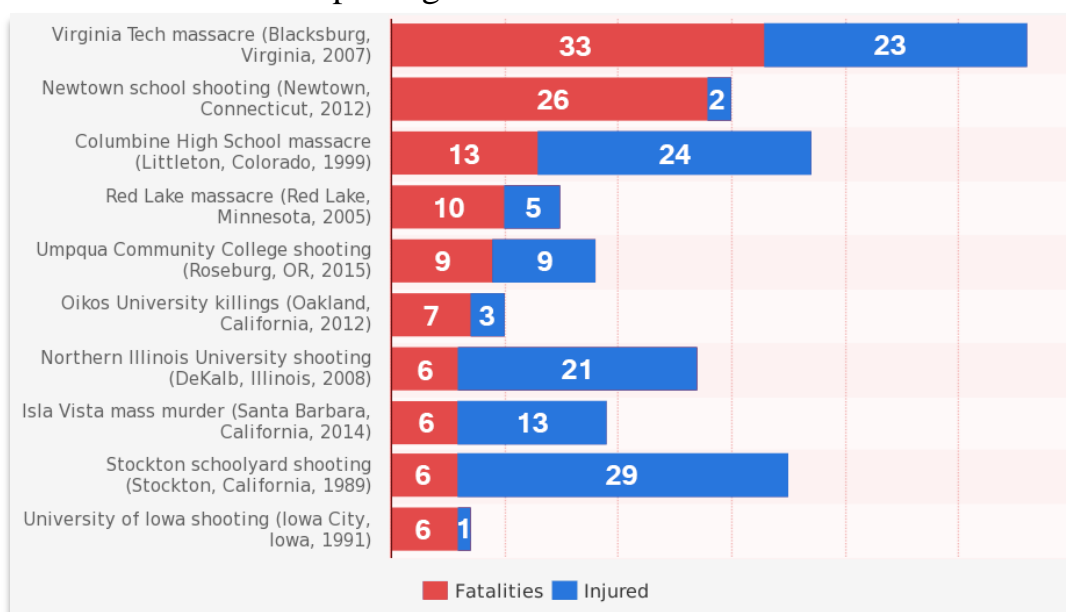
~ Sujata C



Fear and learning do not go hand in hand. There are several words that are associated with fear like *paralyzing*, *numbing*, *derailing*, *freezing*, *chilling*, *sweating*, *stupefying*, etc. Fear gives us goosebumps, sends a chill down our spines and turns our knees into jelly. Indeed, there is a saying, *you are frightened out of your wits*.

It is said that accident happens when you are busy with other things. On September 8, when most schools were in the midst of rehearsals for the annual day or sports day or going on with their regular academics, the murder at Ryan International School in Gurugram took place. It left the nation shocked and shaken. The gory details of the horrific event were unravelled over the next few days as investigators went about their job, looking for the culprit. Speculations that the Class XI student was a victim of the Blue Whale Challenge game were rife.

A look at the history of crimes in schools revealed one chilling fact after another. While children in India are more prone to sexual abuse, records show that children in the US are also at risk of school shootouts. The total number of school shootouts in the US in the last seven years has been 134. 2014 recorded the highest number of incidents at 36; 2013 had 26 cases and 2015 had 21 events. A UNICEF report says that a child dies due to violence every five minutes in the world. In New Delhi, the police receive at least 20 calls every month from schools reporting some kind of violence.



Number of victims of school shootings in the United States between 1991 and 2017

A similar study was conducted by Child Fund Alliance, a network of 11 child-focused development organisations in 41 countries across the world. The study asked students to define what they understood as safety at school, and a whopping 58% in India said that it meant *a clean and safe building having proper preventive and safety measures*.

What it means to be safe	Percentage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protection from strangers Supervision by teachers 	46
Not being target of physical or emotional violence as form of punishment and bullying	23

Impact of school violence: School is a child's second home; safe and caring, just as the young victim of the Gurugram-based school had thought. Like any other form of violence, cruelty or physical harm in school leads to trauma and shock where the brain becomes numb. It severely impacts learning, compromising cognition, comprehension and retention of new information. In the long run, it can lead to post trauma stress disorder (PTSD).

According to psychologists, when children see violence in their environment, it can impact them in several ways:

- School stops being a safe place
- Bed wetting
- Panic attacks
- Breathlessness
- Sudden and severe bouts of crying without any obvious trigger
- Aggressiveness and always being on guard
- Worries about death
- Substance abuse among older children



Picture courtesy:

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When these, along with other symptoms, persist for long it is termed as **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** by medical practitioners. Early intervention is recommended to prevent future complications.

How to cope with school violence?

There are three aspects to it:

- Steps to be taken immediately
- Things to do in the short term
- Things to do in the long term

It is the responsibility of the school to immediately report any incidence of violence to the police. School principal and management must have emergency meeting to take stock of the matter and discuss where they slipped up as well as how to help the victim. Since violence has a ripple effect, the next important thing is to take care of the whole school as a unit. To counter the sense of

helplessness and rebuild the confidence of children, it is a good idea to do something together. Schools can take out rallies or parades to protest violence in society and also show their support for the victims.

Solutions:

Talk to children

Share your thoughts; let children know that it is natural to feel scared to come to school after the violent act and there is nothing wrong in admitting that. There is nothing wrong in being scared! Teachers and counsellors must assure that if it has happened once, it is not going to happen again. The administration too has to be on high alert and more vigilant to deal with any further situation. Children should be made to feel safe by letting them know that law enforcers are available and taking care of the situation.

Get staff and employee certification by police. But what can you do when the perpetrator is a student, and the problem is as trivial as stopping a PTA meeting or impending exams from happening on their normal schedule? Here is where the ***internet and social media regulation for students*** kicks in. In the Ryan School case, it has been found that the class XI student had checked out ways to clear fingerprints on the Internet.

Keep children away from TV and Internet in the immediate aftermath of the event. This is because media sensationalises such matters, which could aggravate the situation.

The school can arrange for ***regular sessions with counsellors and mental health experts*** to attend to every student.

Board-going students must attend weekly meetings with the counsellor so that they can pick up any tell-tale signs of stress, depression or anti-social behaviour among the students.

Setting a long-term action plan is a necessity. Getting children back on track after a traumatic event takes time. Since learning is likely to be impaired, schools need to be lenient with assignments and ready to provide additional support.

What we do wrong in India?

Parents go into attack mode, making demands to arrest members of the school management, which in turn forces the management to go underground for their own safety. This makes it more difficult for teachers to play a positive role and help rehabilitate the children after the crisis.



Picture courtesy: <https://dam.oup.com/share/page/site/elt/document-details?nodeRef=workspace://SpacesStore/cc8e6504-efa7-42ff-83ef-c17c5cf1a5ec>

Management must dos: How does a school prepare for tragedies like this? We must accept that such incidences are no more stray events occurring in far off US. Indian schools too must be prepared for an eventuality like this. Schools must form a security committee that includes management, principal, assistant principal, teacher representatives, canteen manager, PE teacher, counsellors, transport in-charge, security in-charge, high school leader, IT manager, and a few parent representatives. The committee can come together and assess safety of children in the school from every aspect. They can draw up a plan on who does what during a crisis. This will be the group that will swing into action when an untoward incident occurs. School should maintain a database of phone numbers and email IDs of all students and their parents to disseminate school related information. Teachers and parents visiting the school could also play a proactive role to help the school identify bullies as well as students with special needs so that they can be counselled regularly. It is always advisable to keep the primary and senior school buildings separate to avoid chances of bullying. Class teachers must have a fair idea of the home situation of each child through frequent parent interactions, so that they can assess the school performance of the child in a holistic manner. A spokesperson should be identified to interact with officials, parents and media.

Other important things to do:

- Mandate ID cards for all students and teachers
- Enforce rules to deal with violence
- Ensure regular fire drills
- Keep stock of supplies in the school to tide over a few hours of emergency
- Maintain properly working doors and locks in all classes
- Fortify the school compound wall

Conclusion: Our society has reached a stage where children are not safe in any public space, be it schools, parks, or malls. It is a matter of collective shame and requires immediate introspection. It is time we address the situation to give a secure childhood to our children.

Sujata C is a writer and editor with a portfolio of diversified writing categories like web content, articles, short stories for children, technical editing, etc. She has been brand consultant and advisor for several companies and has worked with concerns like McCann Erickson, New Delhi; Foundations Advertising Services, New Delhi; Saatchi and Saatchi, Hyderabad; etc.

Lesson Plan

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When tragedy strikes a school, the teacher's role is pivotal in containing the situation and stemming damage.

Here are a few things that can be tried:

1. Read to your students

It is impossible to make sense of the violence that surrounds us today. One of the most challenging tasks is to explain them to children, especially an incidence of death. Parents of Pradyuman's classmates must have gone through this nightmare. Children become numb or all knotted up inside. Their behaviours alter and their learning gets



affected. Books come to our rescue at such times. There are many sensitively written books that engage with the idea of death and loss to children.

For children

- *Cry Heart, But Never Break* by Glen Ringtved
- *Love is Forever* by Casey Rislov
- *A Terrible Thing Happened* by Margeret Homes
- *Tess's Tree* by Jess Brailer
- *When Dinosaurs Die* by Laura Brown
- *Badger's Parting Gift* by Susan Varley
- *When I feel Sad* by Corenlia Maud Spelman
- *Scaredy Squirrel* by Melanie Watt
- *Peaceful Piggy Meditation* by Kerry Lee Maclean
- *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst

For adults

- Fred Rogers on *Times of Tragedy*
- *Dear Mr Rogers, Does It Ever Rain in Your Neighbourhood?: Letters to Mr Rogers* by Fred Rogers

2. Talk and discuss

Encourage discussions to make children open up and address their concerns. *Will someone kill me as well?* is a thought likely to be on every child's mind even if they don't tell us. Everyone should be allowed to talk, not just the few dominating ones. Tragedy affects different people differently. Not every child opens up so easily; some may retreat into a shell. Instead of hushing up, it is good to talk about things that are on top of everyone's mind. Topics can include: *How to spot a bully*, *Places to take shelter in a crisis*, *Staying safe in the bus*, *Playing safely*, etc.

Teachers as well as parents must bear in mind that children will not be in a state to absorb new information immediately after a tragic incident. The fact that they are attending school after the tragedy is in itself crossing a big hurdle, and teachers must extend their support by giving them time to fall into the regular routine. Students must know that their teacher understands how they are feeling.

3. Encourage students to enrol for martial arts like judo, karate or taekwondo. This will improve their self-confidence.
4. Help children process complex emotions of fear through play acting. Masks can be used to help children act out and release their pent up fears and phobias, and learn how to deal with a situation.
5. Organise puppet shows as a means to provide emotional catharsis.
6. Ask children to draw or paint. It is an effective process of healing through art. Talk to them one on one about their artwork and ask them what it means. Their responses will reveal what prompted them to draw a certain image. Support and reassurance can be provided accordingly.
7. Identify a suitable support mechanism to help some children deal with trauma. For example, music has a healing effect.



Picture courtesy:

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8. Conduct yoga classes and breathing exercises.

9. Arrange for dance sessions as a mode of therapy. Experts say, free style dance form helps the body move into a state of activity that expresses symbolically what the dancer is feeling inside.

Psychotherapeutic use of dance can be made through the help of a professional.



10. Use sports as a therapy. It is a great way to rehabilitate students after trauma. A vigorous game of handball or football or any athletics activity help release the negative pent up emotions. Running, cycling, swimming, gymnastics are beneficial in helping the body and mind to recuperate.

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Kibitz



Kibitz (verb)

Pronunciation: /kɪbɪts/

Meaning: To look on and offer unwelcome advice, especially at a card game.

Origin and additional information: Etymologically the word has multiple origins – from *kibetsn* in Yiddish meaning “to cognate” as well as *kiebitzen* in German meaning “to look on”. Primarily used in American English, the earliest known use of the word was as recent as 1910. Noted linguist, lexicographer, language columnist and word nut, Ben Zimmer, traces the earliest use of the word in an article published in *The New York Tribune* on May 13, 1910. Both the verb form and its noun form, *kibitzer* (one who kibitzes) entered American English from its Yiddish speaking population in the early twentieth century, but became popular only in the late 1920s through a Broadway comedy called *The Kibitzer*, performed by a young Jewish actor who had moved to New York from Bucharest, Romania.

Word section: Initially the word was used in connection with card games and the many onlookers that the game inevitably drew. It was used to refer to someone peeking over a card player, or pesky onlookers in general. However, lexicologists have been baffled by the mystery of the origin of this word which

has an otherwise rich history. Ted Merwin in his book *In Their Own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture* shows how Paramount Pictures circulated a spreadsheet explaining the movie theatres how to promote the word when *The Kibitzer* was made into a film.

The spreadsheet read:

To millions of persons this word as yet means nothing. That's why it is a wow title, for a full meaning of the term is only realized after the public has seen the picture.

The studio publicist was right in foreseeing that the movie would make the American audience kibitzer-conscious.

Usage:

- i. Who are we to *kibitz* from the sidelines without access to secret briefings, intelligence, knowledge, and all of the apparatus of government?

(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/kibitz>)

- ii. Relieving the tension of hours below surface, crewmen on board a U.S. Navy submarine play a round of cards while a shipmate *kibitzes* from his bunk.

(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/kibitz>)

- iii. At a beer saloon on the East Side, which has a clubroom annex, where skat and pinochle are the chief attractions, but where visitors who are not satisfied with playing the silent part of *kibitz* discuss intricate problems in science, religion, politics and statecraft, a placard was posted yesterday showing a rampant ram and this legend in German: "Theodore Roosevelt is on time for everything. He will reach Germany in the bock beer season and will drink bruderschaft with the Kaiser in ---- beer. Prosit!

The New York Tribune, May 13, 1910