

## Gun Violence and Our Children

By Nancy Green

Some of us are old enough to remember hiding under our desks in preparation for a nuclear war. Even as a first grader, I thought it was ridiculous. And luckily, the dreaded event never happened, and these drills stopped.

Fast forward to today as “active shooter drills” are occurring in almost every school in America. Unfortunately, they are not ridiculous.

According to a June 2022 article in [Education Week Magazine](#), as of the 2019-2020 school year, 96% of public schools reported written procedures for active shooter drills. But how to best protect children without traumatizing them has become a new challenge for educators and child mental health professionals.

At the most extreme, some schools have engaged in actual simulations. These drills may involve actors running into classrooms, shooting pellet guns, and spreading fake blood. Sometimes the students are not even told that this is a drill. Sandy Hook Promise, an organization dedicated to eliminating violence in schools, has lobbied against these types of programs as emotionally harmful and not at all helpful in preparing students for gun violence.

More common drills require students and teachers to remain on lockdown for a designated time by turning off the lights, locking the doors, and remaining quiet. But even these types of drills have recently come under scrutiny.

According to recent research from Everytown for Gun Safety and the Georgia Institute of Technology, active shooter drills in schools are associated with increases in depression, anxiety, and physiological health problems for children, teachers, and parents, particularly in the 90 days following the drill. For many the results are longer lasting.

This leaves many educators in a bind. Obviously, the emotional health of students is paramount, but so is their safety.

Less intrusive safety steps were offered by psychologist Arthur Dobrin in an August 2022 article in [Psychology Today](#). At its most basic are security issues. He

suggests not one, but two locked doors that require a two-step entry into the school to make access more difficult. All schools should be equipped with “panic button alert” systems. Local police precincts should be familiar with school layouts (that include blueprints of the school) and should visit the school regularly. Teachers should be trained in emergency management—preventive as well as emergency procedures in case an event occurs.

Meantime, when conducting active shooter drills, the following guidelines are recommended by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

1. Drills should be announced in advance. Parents, teachers, and children should know they will be occurring. (Most states, including New York, do not require this.)
2. For students with emotional disabilities, special care should be taken to prepare them consistent with their needs. This is also true for students who have had a recent trauma or loss.
3. Coping strategies such as breathing techniques and a buddy system should be implemented to assist with the stress of the drill.

New York State currently requires four lockdown drills per year. Obviously, that includes Shelter Island. According to School Superintendent Brian Doelger, the Shelter Island School conducts these lockdown drills as per the state’s mandate. One or two are scheduled and the rest are not. In all cases, though, participants are told that it is only a drill. And parents are always emailed afterwards. Additionally, our local police department is involved in the drills and takes an active role in prevention procedures.

All this school preparedness is important, but the best psychological training can come from parents. Statistically, the chance of a child dying in a school shooting is about the same as being killed by lightning. But that number does not include those wounded or traumatized by an event.

So, parents need to discuss school violence proactively and age appropriately--letting kids know that the chances of this happening are slim, but like a school fire, they must know what to do.

By not discussing the issue and pretending it does not exist, we do our children a disservice. However, by over-emphasizing the danger we may raise a terrified generation. Educators and mental health practitioners are seeking to find the right balance.

Unfortunately, this is relatively new ground and one that is not going away. The gun violence in America is shameful, and in the absence of sensible gun prevention laws, we all need to figure out the best way to take care of our children.

Nancy Green, a retired social worker, was part of the United States Postal Service program to end workplace violence, beginning in the early 1990's.