

Tips for Working Together to Create Safer Schools

When crime, drugs, and violence spill over from the streets into the schools, a safe learning environment becomes increasingly difficult. Students carry weapons for protection. Gunfights start replacing fist-fights. Many students must travel through gang turf or groups of drug dealers just to get to school. Violence seems to become an acceptable way to settle conflicts. And drugs make it hard for users — and others — to learn. Students cannot learn and teachers cannot teach.



Addressing the violence issue is difficult and complex; however, there are ways to create a safer environment in which to learn. Teens can't do it alone because there needs to be a community-wide effort addressing the issue. They need help from others. But teens can take the lead. Creating a safe place where you can learn and grow depends on a partnership among students, parents, teachers, and other community institutions to prevent school violence. Think about the issues that affect your school, and see how you or a team of people can make a difference in addressing the problem. Here are some suggestions on how you can involve other students, parents, school staff and others in the community to help create a safe school.

Students

- Settle arguments with words, not fists or weapons. If your school doesn't have a conflict mediation program, help start one.
- Don't carry guns, knives, or other weapons to school. Tell a school official immediately if you see another student with a gun, knife, or other weapon.
- Report crimes or suspicious activities to the police, school authorities, or parents.
- Tell a teacher, parent, or trusted adult if you're worried about a bully or threats of violence by another student.
- Learn safe routes for traveling to and from school and stick to them. Know good places to seek help.
- Help start a mediation program in your school. Or help begin a student court that hears cases on violations on school policies — fighting, stealing, or cheating.
- Get involved in your school's anti-violence activities — have poster contests against violence, hold anti-drug rallies, volunteer to counsel peers. If there's no peer counseling program at your school, help start one.
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Parents

If it's talking straight with your parents about school issues or working with the PTA on holding meetings to educate adults about drugs in your community, parents must be involved in creating a safer school. Encourage parents to:

- spend time with you, attend the activities you're involved in, or just have dinner together.
- teach children how to reduce their risks of becoming crime victims.
- know where children are, what they are doing, and whom they are with at all times. Set clear rules in advance about acceptable activities.
- ask children about what goes on during the school day. Listen to what they say and take their concerns and worries seriously.
- help children learn nonviolent ways to handle frustration, anger, and conflict.
- refuse to allow children to carry guns, knives, or other weapons.
- become involved in school activities — PTA, field trips, and helping in class or the lunch room.

School Staff

The school staff including the administration must be behind any effort to create a safer school. Here are a few ideas of how the school can be involved in this effort. School staff and administrators can:

- evaluate school's safety objectively. Set targets for improvement. Be honest about crime problems and work toward bettering the situation.
- develop consistent disciplinary policies, good security procedures, and response plans for emergencies.
- train school personnel in conflict resolution, problem solving, drug prevention, crisis intervention, cultural sensitivity, classroom management, and counseling skills. Make sure they can recognize trouble signs and identify potentially violent students.
- encourage students to talk about worries, questions, and fears about what's going on in their schools, homes, and neighborhoods. Listen carefully to what they say.
- take seriously students who make threats — even if it's in writing.
- take time to talk about violence or frightening experiences that occur at school or in the neighborhood. Discuss the consequences and get students to think about what other choices besides violence might have been available. Get help from trained counselors, if necessary.
- work with students, parents, law enforcement, local governments, and community based groups to develop wider-scope crime prevention efforts.
- be open to student-led solutions.

Take Action

- Recruit other teens, parents, school staff, sheriff to develop safe school task force.
- Start a conflict resolution program in your school.
- Set up a group for teens to share problems and solutions.



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