

Helping Our Children Feel Safe and Secure at School and Other Social Settings

Reasoning

At one of our early sessions in the development of this curriculum one of the members of our group made the statement, “Are we teaching our children to fear?” All of us – parents, teachers, and concerned adults – want our children to feel safe and secure in the settings in which they find themselves on a regular basis. When this feeling of security is absent, we tend to worry about what can or will happen when we speak and interact with those around us. Helping our children (and those who are no longer children) develop these skills is something in which Jesus calls each of us to actively participate.

The purpose of this section of “A Christians Response to Violence” is to give suggestions and share thoughts on enabling our children to live healthy, fear-less lives. This isn’t an easy task and is one that we should all be willing to review and work on throughout our lives.

Earlier in this seminar, we delved in-depth into fear and how it relates to behavior. We all learn from our parents, siblings and friends what we should be afraid of, even if we’ve never experienced danger first hand. However, confidence is something we can also learn.

Talking With Your Children by Paul Newhall

We’ve been told how difficult it is to talk with our children and many parents and other adults have given up on the power of conversation. If we don’t talk with our children about our fears, our shortcomings (this doesn’t mean that we share all of our “dirty little secrets”), and our ways of dealing with conflict, they will learn to take their social cues from other sources like television shows and their peers. Talking with our children about the various aspects of our lives helps them come to a better understanding of how adults deal with difficulty in their lives. It gives them a level of relationship and security that can’t be found any other way and allows them to feel like you trust them.

If you want your children to feel secure you have to talk to them! Trying to protect them from the realities of life puts them at a disadvantage. It used to be that families talked about what was happening in their lives around the dinner table. While this may not be a regular occurrence in your family, finding time to sit and talk with your children in an environment where they know they’ll be taken seriously, not talked down to, and where they can say anything without the fear of reprisal is remarkably important.

I was fortunate to be able to take my children to school most days. These were often the times when I had a chance to see how things were going in their lives. Whether it was the early morning ride to zero hour for the oldest, talking about the latest happenings with the middle one, or going out for our weekly “date” to Panera Bread with the youngest, I tried to listen and chat with them. I didn’t always like hearing what they told me about their lives, but it gave me the opportunity to share my thoughts and how I might have reacted in a situation. It also gave me the chance to let them know about times I’d mishandled dealing with others and how I might have acted differently.

If you don’t regularly talk with your children, you need to build that into your schedule immediately! Open lines of communication are crucial for children to believe they have an outlet for their concerns and someone who will give them reliably good guidance when they are having trouble navigating the problems that arise in life.

REFLECTION FROM LITERATURE:

From *The Scriptures Sing of Christmas*

By J. Ellsworth Kalas

... So many of our peacemaking efforts seem to go awry, not only at the level of international affairs, but within the circle of friendship, family, marriage, and business. And yes, within the church, too! The psalmist put it in mournful tones:

I am for peace;
But when I speak,
They are for war (Psalm 120:7)

Many of us have felt that way on some occasion or other. I must confess, as I examine my experiences, that when I have been for peace – that is, for the resolution of some conflict – I have often been for it specifically on my terms. I have sometimes seen earnest pacifists become unpleasantly aggressive in controversy over how peace should be pursued. I've seen two persons who loved each other break their relationship because they loved their own point of view more than they loved each other – and obviously, more than they loved peace. Nations and politicians often excuse themselves on the ground that they want peace only with honor, and sometimes they may be justified in what they say. But often, I think, honor is spelled, “My way.” Which is to say, we must want peace more than we want our own way, more than our particular method of solution, more than our pride. I wouldn't want any of us to sacrifice principle, but I know from experience that principle has a way of seeming identical with one's personal point of view. (pp. 24-25)

DISCUSSION:

1. Talk with the person next to you about one of the most important conversations you had with a parent or other adult. How did it change your actions or your attitude?
2. How can we temper our language to make our views known without discouraging the sharing or understanding of other people's views?

Bullying Awareness

Although bullying may not be something that's happening in your own home, your child's feeling of safety and well-being may be impacted by things experienced elsewhere – but you can see the symptoms in his or her behavior exhibited at home.

Bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior toward a person perceived to be weaker. Children are sometimes ill-equipped to diffuse the situation and need help from adults. Signs your child is being bullied include:

- Unexplainable injuries
- Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick or faking illness
- Changes in eating habits, like suddenly skipping meals or binge eating. Kids may come home from school hungry because they did not eat lunch.
- Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares
- Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school
- Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations

- Feelings of helplessness or decreased self esteem
- Self-destructive behaviors such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide

Source: [Stop Bullying.gov](http://StopBullying.gov)¹

If you recognize some of these symptoms in your child(ren), urge them to talk to you about it and let them know they don't have to deal with it alone. Get school officials involved if the problem is happening at school or on the bus. If the bullying is happening to your child in your neighborhood, shield him or her from the bullies by welcoming your children's friends into your own home and yard to play there, where you can supervise them. Any bullying that rises to the level of physical assault should be reported to your local police department.

Please go to www.stopbullying.gov for more information.

Reporting Threats of School Violence

The Center To Prevent Youth Violence created a national hotline to empower students take an important, proactive role in preventing violence at school. Many threats go unreported because students don't want to be labeled a "snitch" or fear that there will be retaliation. However, 83% of middle-schoolers would be willing to report another student at school with a weapon if they could do so anonymously.

The statistics on school violence are staggering:

- 1,150,000 high school students are threatened or injured with a weapon at school each year
- school violence lands 90,000 students in the emergency room each year
- nearly 1,000,000 high school students stayed home from school in the past 30 days because they felt unsafe at school
- 2,500,000 of high school students carried a weapon at least once in the past 30 days
- **in 4 out of 5 school shootings, at least one other person had prior knowledge of the attack**

Source: Speak Up.com²

Urge your children to speak up if they've heard someone make threats of violence. Of course they don't want to get someone else in trouble. And they may question whether or not the person who made the threat was serious or "just kidding." However, teach them that it is far better to be safe than sorry. They'd feel much worse if some friends or classmates were injured or killed in a preventable act of violence. Let them know there is a hotline they can call 24/7 to make a completely anonymous report: **1-866-SPEAK-UP** (1-866-773-2587). For more information, visit speakup.com.

DISCUSSION:

1. Do you have fears that a spree shooting could happen in your child's school?
2. Do you think having an armed guard at schools or arming the teachers is a good idea? Why or why not?

3. Does it make our children feel more or less safe when they have to participate in “lock-down” drills at school?

Staying Safe Online

Cybercrime is a growing problem in our nation and can lead to fraud, identity theft, cyberbullying and even child abduction/exploitation. Cyberbullying, or bullying that takes place using electronic technology, is also on the rise. Examples of cyberbullying include demeaning or harassing text messages, emails, or posts on social networking sites; false rumors, embarrassing pictures, videos or website links sent by email, text, or posted on social networking sites; and fake profiles.³

As a parent, you should be extremely vigilant when children are on the computer, play multi-user games online, use social networks, send emails or text messages. It is important that you monitor their computer activity and activity with other electronic devices, such as their cell phone. There are filters, blocking software and parental controls that you can utilize to keep children off of sites that are inappropriate for them.

The FBI has put together an excellent [*Parent's Guide to Internet Safety*](#)⁴ that all parents should use as a resource. It has practical information about minimizing risk, warning signs that your child may be at risk online, and what you should do if you suspect your child might be communicating with a child predator or cyberstalker online. The guide includes the following instructions parents should teach their children to help keep them safe:

- Children should never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they met online.
- Children should never upload (post) pictures of themselves onto the internet or online service to people they do not personally know.
- Children should never give out identifying information such as their name, home address, school name, or telephone number.
- Children should never download pictures from an unknown source, as there is a good chance there could be sexually explicit images.
- Children should never respond to messages or bulletin board postings that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent or harassing.
- Children should know that whatever they're told online may or may not be true.

DISCUSSION:

1. Most parents and teachers tell children to not be tattle-tales: how then can we encourage them to report bullying and abuse?
2. How do you tell when you are being over-protective as opposed to letting your child gain confidence in self-protection?
3. How can we best build a child's self-esteem so that he or she can stand up to bullies?
4. Do you feel as a parent that it is your duty to monitor your child's electronic activity or that doing so is an invasion of privacy?

REFLECTION FROM SCRIPTURE:

John 8: “³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now

what do you say?"⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.⁹ When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"¹¹ She said, "No one, sir."¹² And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

DISCUSSION:

1. In what way were the men who brought the woman to Jesus bullies?
2. Why did the crowd melt away?

Conclusion

It is important for children to have someone to whom they can open up about what is happening in their lives. Ideally, parents should foster an open, trusting and reliably supportive relationship with their kids from the start. When children feel comfortable and encouraged about sharing things with their parents, pastors, and teachers or school counselors, they are more likely to go to those trusted adults for help when they are in "over their heads" and are potentially facing real danger.

¹ "Warning Signs." *StopBullying.gov*. U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/warning-signs#bullied>>.

² "Resources: Infographic." *SPEAK UP*. The Center to Prevent Youth Violence, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <http://speakup.com/media/2014/speak-up-infographic_final.png>.

³ "Cyberbullying." *StopBullying.gov*. U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/>>.

⁴ "Parent Guide to Internet Safety." *FBI Reports and Publications*. U.S. Dept. of Justice, 03 June 2005. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/parent-guide/parent-guide>>.