

Talking to Kids About a 'Lockdown'

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In earlier times, when the threat came from nuclear weapons rather than young men with guns, schools trained children in "duck and cover" drills. These days, we have "lockdowns," requiring hiding from someone with a murderous intent and the means to accomplish it. Awful as the threats are, we also must find ways to tell our children to take care without terrifying them.

There are two parts to this issue:

- First, what can we say when we rehearse such a scary prospect?
- Secondly, should the horror come to pass, what can we say as it is occurring to mitigate it in nightmares and memory?

In the book I co-authored, *Verbal First Aid: Help Your Kids Heal From Fear and Pain--And Come Out Strong*, we provided a few strategies for preparing children for emergencies and other unexpected occurrences without frightening them. As a result, I was approached by a member of a Campus Safety and Crisis Response Committee of a small elementary school in California wondering how the subject of lockdown drills might most supportively be approached by the schools. They were hoping to develop a script they might then share.

In response I began by thinking about the word "lockdown." Because the word is most generally associated with prisons, it might make us all more comfortable to use a phrase currently in favor in the first-responder world: "shelter in place." It has a gentler feeling and, just as the word "safe" is more comforting at such times, "shelter" is valuable as well. They accepted that suggestion enthusiastically. And to soften the drama, they are couching the lockdown/secure drill along with flood, gas leak, and nuclear power issues.

Then, for part one, I offered these three general strategies:

Strategy 1: Listen to an authority figure for safety.

You might say to a child, "Remember when you were younger and you'd run ahead of your mother or father to the corner. And they'd be slower to get there, so when you got there without them they'd shout 'Stop!' or 'Freeze!' and you'd have to wait for them, there at the corner, before going into the street. And you knew why. Because there were cars that you might not see, drivers who might not see you. And your parents wanted to keep you safe.

Well, sometimes there still might be dangers that you can't see that the grown-ups know about and so they tell you to 'stop!' and even hide, sometimes, and wait for them to say 'All Clear, you can come out now.' And it's good to practice that. "

Strategy 2: Practice means being prepared.

Just as we sometimes practice fire drills so that we'll know what to do in case there is a fire, we are now going to practice being safe when there's trouble around. Even the toughest guys in the military practice what they're going to do in a difficult situation. Practice helps make doing the most useful, safest thing automatic. It creates a program in your mind that then runs itself in a time when thinking could be frozen by fear. (The British Army called it the "7 Ps: Proper Planning and Preparation Prevent Piss Poor Performance." For kids we might say "Proper Prior Planning and Preparation Prevent Poor Performance.") The bad thing may never happen, but when we're practiced in protecting ourselves, then we don't have to worry that we won't know what to do.

Strategy 3: A just-in-case plan

In another way it's like wearing a helmet when we ride our bikes. We wear helmets and kneepads when we skateboard. We don't expect to fall, but if we do, we'll be protected. Then we don't have to worry. We can just ride our bikes and boards and not even think about falling, because we have the situation covered. Being prepared is a "just in case" measure that helps you to feel at a deeper level that you're safe.