

Mitigating Negative Psychological Effects of School Lockdowns: Brief Guidance for Schools

While school shootings are rare, perception of risk is high. For decades schools have engaged in actions designed to prevent, prepare for, and respond to safety threats. Among a myriad of school safety procedures, virtually all of today's schools engage in lockdown drills (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). A seemingly growing number of schools are conducting actual lockdowns, with the *Washington Post* reporting 6,200 lockdowns, experienced by 4.1 million children and youth, during the 2017-2018 school year. Designed to protect students from danger in and around a school, lockdowns are intended to secure a school to keep out a threat. They also require students to sit quietly and out of sight (away from windows and doors). Lockdowns can be triggered due to police action in the neighborhood, online threats, or other perceived dangers, such as a dangerous animal. Lockdowns can save lives and are considered best practice in crisis response. However, depending on circumstances, some lockdowns may produce anxiety, stress, and traumatic symptoms in some students or staff, as well as loss of instructional time.

PLANNING IS CRITICAL

Schools should plan for lockdowns as part of comprehensive emergency preparedness (Brock et al., 2016; Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013). Planning should include considerations for age and developmental levels, disabilities that might impede mobility and access to instructions, sensory disabilities such as autism that might heighten a distress reaction and/or impede response to instruction, and intellectual disabilities that might impede understanding a situation or instructions. Additionally, second language considerations for students and families must also be addressed.

It is critical that administrators, school-employed mental health professionals, school resource and police officers, and safety and crisis team members work closely together to carefully develop a staff and student response protocol that follows best practice considerations, such as those outlined in the document developed jointly by the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of School Resource Officers (2017), *Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills*. Armed assailant drills that are not conducted appropriately may cause physical and psychological harm to students and staff, not to mention disruption to the overall learning environment.

Student learning is promoted by a predictable school day and by perceptions that their school is a safe place. The following are some best-practice guidelines.

Two Types of Lockdowns

Full-Scale Lockdown. Lock/barricade doors, close blinds, cover windows, turn out lights, be silent, and make rooms seem unoccupied (e.g., students and staff hide out of sightline of doors and windows). This is used when there is imminent danger to the school. This is highly impactful and can result in stress and traumatic reactions.

Secured Perimeter/Lockout. Lock classroom and exterior doors; no one enters or leaves the building, but teachers continue with instruction. Though this can also unnerve children and adults, it is less disruptive and stressful than the full-scale lockdown.

PREPARING FOR A LOCKDOWN

- Work with local law enforcement to develop different lockdown processes for emergencies that happen in the

community where schools should be on heightened alert (e.g., secured perimeter, lockout, soft lockdown) and one for when an immediate threat is on school property or in the school building. Differentiating lockdowns can help to mitigate potentially traumatic experiences when situations are occurring in the community and are not an immediate threat to the school. Work with emergency dispatchers to help them understand the different lockdown terms in your community.

- Conduct drills, both to ensure adaptive behavior in the event of an emergency and to ease the stress of going through a real-life emergency. Drills must be carefully planned and should be integrated into yearly crisis preparation activities, including frequent and varied practice, training, and discussion activities. When done appropriately, lockdown drills can increase knowledge and skills to respond appropriately without elevating anxiety or perceived safety risk (Zhe & Nickerson, 2007). Refer to [*Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills*](#) (2017) for guidance on conducting armed assailant drills.
- Start with an orientation to the lockdown drill that provides an overview of what to expect. This should be tailored to developmental level, second language status, and disabilities. Such orientations also help staff members to appreciate their roles and expected actions.
- Always announce lockdown drills. The message should say something such as, “This is an emergency drill, not an actual emergency. This is a drill. We are now practicing how to keep safe in an emergency. This is a drill.”
- It is imperative that schools take into account the trauma history of persons participating in the drill. Special accommodations, such as advanced warning of an upcoming drill, should be given to any student or staff member who is judged to potentially find a lockdown drill frightening.
- To the extent possible, ensure staff members are able to recognize traumatic stress reactions and are able to support students during a lockdown, for example, by being able to use stabilization or grounding techniques (which help distressed persons regain emotional control).
- Ensure that a school administrator is present during a lockdown drill.
- Include the school resource officer and school-employed mental health professionals in the planning and evaluation process.
- Add a discussion of lockdown drills to parent handbooks, including the rationale for and procedures of these drills.
- Consider posting a message on social media that the school is conducting a drill to help prevent rumors or confusion about the event in the broader community.

DURING A LOCKDOWN

- Provide as much clear, direct information as possible, and emphasize the importance of following adult direction. Carefully consider the developmental appropriateness of safety vocabulary and verbiage. For example, for young children, saying “go,” “get out,” and “evacuate” instead of “escape” or “run” may help support calm and orderly action and mitigate psychological impact of crisis.
- Model a controlled response. An effective response should result in staff who inspire calm and confidence in students. Remind students to turn off or silence their phones. Everyone should remain silent.
- Staff members should reassure distressed students and be trained to use stabilization and grounding techniques.
- Communicate clearly during the lockdown whether or not there is imminent danger to the school. Conveying factual information as quickly as possible will minimize anxiety and fear.
- Communicate clearly with families via a pre-established system and social media as appropriate. As soon as possible, reassure families that their children are safe. Having two types of lockdown responses will help with this.
- Have a designated member of the crisis team monitoring social media to correct misinformation and provide updates as appropriate.
- Use the secured perimeter/lockout whenever it is safe to do so. This will minimize the potential for psychological trauma and maintain the learning environment. Full-scale lockdowns should be employed only when absolutely necessary due to imminent danger to the school.

AFTER A LOCKDOWN

- Coordinate with law enforcement to determine actual risk related to the triggering event.
- Work with a public information officer to communicate quickly with parents, neighboring schools, and the media with as much factual detail as possible and appropriate.
- As indicated, make use of student–caregiver reunification procedures, with special attention given to reconnecting younger students with their primary caregivers.
- Provide primary caregivers with [guidance](#) on how to talk with their children about their concerns or fears related to violence at school or in the community (NASP, 2016b).
- As indicated, share actual update on social media.
- Recognize trauma reactions and offer mental health crisis intervention assistance (Brock et al., 2016).
- Provide an opportunity for students and staff members to share their reactions to the lockdown.
- Ensure that an evaluation of the lockdown is conducted.

Lockdowns are an important part of school safety and crisis preparedness. However, it is imperative that school leaders understand that the perception of safety or risk, even absent a real threat, can have a very real effect on students and staff. Attending to the developmental and psychological well-being of students and staff before, during, and after lockdowns can help minimize the potential for unintended harm.

RELATED RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

- Brock, S. E., Nickerson, A. B., Reeves, M. A. L., Conolly, C. N., Jimerson, S. R., Pesce, R. C., & Lazzaro, B. R. (2016). *School crisis prevention and intervention: The PREPaRE model* (2nd ed.). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Cowan, K. C., Vaillancourt, K., Rossen, E., & Pollitt, K. (2013). *A framework for safe and successful schools* [Brief]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools>
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2016a). *Social media and school crises: Brief facts and tips* [handout]. Bethesda, MD: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/social-media-and-school-crises>
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2016b). *Talking to children about violence: Tips for parents and teachers* [handout]. Bethesda, MD: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/talking-to-children-about-violence-tips-for-parents-and-teachers>
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) & National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO). (2017). *Best practice considerations for schools in active shooter and other armed assailant drills* [Brief]. Bethesda, MD: NASP. Retrieved from http://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/BP_Armed_Assailant_Drills.pdf
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2016). *Emergency management: Improved federal coordination could better assist K-12 schools prepare for emergencies*. Washington DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/675737.pdf>
- Zhe, E. J., & Nickerson, A. B. (2007). Effects of an intruder crisis drill on children’s knowledge, anxiety, and perceptions of school safety. *School Psychology Review*, 36, 501–508. Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/periodicals/spr/volume-36/volume-36-issue-3/effects-of-an-intruder-crisis-drill-on-childrens-knowledge-anxiety-and-perceptions-of-school-safety>