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CRISIS INTERVENTION

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Dear Readers,

The stream of school shootings since Columbine has left both the public and crisis intervenors with a bitter question: Since circumstances all but rule out intervention, are there really any tools for prevention?

Retired FBI hostage negotiator Dwayne Fuselier and professor and author Dr. Jeffrey Daniels believe that there are. Here's why.

These school shootings have one characteristic that separate them from other acts of school violence: the shooter does not suddenly snap; rather, the shooting is meticulously planned over a period of time. The Secret Service has found that in more than 80 percent of critical incidents, the shooters explicitly revealed their intentions to their peers. Far from being "invisible," most shooters were already of concern to people in their lives.

And this is the critical second part: students know, but they do not talk.

Prevention, then, means taking the fight to the front lines: the students and their parents. It means getting teenagers to talk to parents, something that is difficult in the best of times, but perhaps more so in this situation, when there are significant reasons for their silence.

This is where Fuselier and Daniels come in. *Breaking the Code of Silence* takes us straight to the heart – and art – of getting people to talk. As Fuselier puts it, "These communication strategies are the best that hostage negotiators have, and they have been field tested for 30 years. If they can be effective in a 'worst case' scenario that prevents homicide and suicides, they can help create open lines of communication, at a much earlier stage, with your teenager."

From dealing with bullying to preventing school shootings, communication is the first and best prevention we have. If we can find a way to bring these strategies home, if funding and training now devoted to aftershock and trauma can be expanded to prevention, then perhaps we will have found the means to forestall these tragedies and save precious lives.

Please contact Lynne Kinnucan at kinnucan@patriot.net, or the authors at dfuselier@msn.com and jeffrey.daniels@mail.wvu.edu, to learn more about their upcoming trainings and how to put these strategies to work.

All the best,

Lynne Kinnucan

Chair and Editor, Crisis Intervention News

Breaking the “Code of Silence”: A Lesson from Columbine

“These communication strategies are the best that hostage negotiators have, and they have been field tested for 30 years. If they can be effective in a ‘worst case’ scenario that prevents prevent homicide and suicides, they can help create open lines of communication, at a much earlier stage, with your teenager.”

G. Dwayne Fuselier, Ph.D., FBI (ret.) and Jeffrey A. Daniels, Ph.D., West Virginia University



G. Dwayne Fuselier



Jeffrey A. Daniels

Introduction

More than a decade after the massacre at Columbine High School, we must still ask ourselves two questions: What have we, as crisis intervention professionals and/or parents, learned from that incident and its aftermath, and what can we do to help prevent future school shootings? The good news is that lessons have been learned, actions taken and shootings averted. The bad news is that school violence is not amenable to a quick fix. Combating it is an ongoing process. The focus of this article is on the roles parents and their school children can play in that process.

In the years immediately following the Columbine incident, two studies—one conducted by the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime¹ and the other by the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education²—came up with strikingly similar findings and recommendations. Three of the findings are relevant in the context of preventative steps available to parents and crisis intervention professionals.

The first finding from both studies is that there is no accurate profile of a school shooter. They have come from all ethnic, economic and social classes. Typically, they are neither “misfits” nor “outcasts.” In fact, most shooters have come from solid, two-parent homes and have had no previous history of violence.

The second finding is that the shooters did not just “snap” and strike out at their fellow students; rather, they planned their attack for some period of time, ranging from a day or so to over a year. *It is during this planning period that they engaged in what the FBI calls “leakage”*—that is, the intentional or unintentional revealing of clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes or intentions that might signal an impending violent act. Far from being “invisible,” most shooters were already of concern to people in their lives. The Secret Service, in fact, found that 81 percent of school shooters had explicitly revealed their intentions to their peers.

It is this factor that makes parents and teenagers one of the best prevention tools against school violence...if they can break the barrier reported in the FBI’s third finding: the existence of a “code of silence.” When other students know of an impending attack and tell no one, it is usually a case of their not believing that the threat of violence is serious, not having a strong enough connection with anyone at the school or at home to report it, or not wanting to be perceived as a “snitch.”

In response to these and other findings, both reports recommended a multilevel approach to prevention. The primary level involves finding out about “behaviors of con-

1. *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective.*

<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf>

2. *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative.*

http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf

cern.” The best source of such information about students who have made threatening statements is from the students themselves. The second level requires a multidisciplinary team to evaluate the identified behaviors of concern and, if necessary, make recommendations regarding an appropriate intervention. The third level of prevention is physical security at the schools.

Parents as Mentors

Clearly, parents are best situated to provide an environment in which young people can feel comfortable discussing the issues with which they are dealing. Once the lines of communication are open, it then becomes possible to: 1) help them make responsible decisions about those issues, and 2) identify potential and actual “behaviors of concern”—both theirs and those of other students with whom they come in contact. The value of this communication-based approach has been proven by recent research on averted school shootings. It remains now to give parents all the tools they need to create an environment for ongoing, open and trusting communications.

Active Listening Skills, used world-wide by psychologists, crisis intervention professionals and law enforcement crisis negotiation teams, can elicit a wealth of practical information. Once called “law enforcement’s most powerful non-lethal weapon,” they are used in worst-case scenarios to prevent homicides and suicides. If they can be helpful in a ‘worst case’ scenario in an effort to prevent homicide and/or suicides, we believe they can be vitally important in creating and maintaining open lines of communication, at a much earlier stage, with your teenager.

Parents play many roles in the lives of their children, including guardian, teacher and sometimes judge and jury. In the circumstances under discussion, we are suggesting that they take on the role of mentor, the more experienced person who can guide and advise a younger, less experienced person. Gathering together definitions taken from business and educational settings, a fuller description might be the following: A mentor is a mature, experienced and trustworthy person who has a genuine interest in sharing knowledge, skills, information and perspective in order to foster, guide, encourage and support the growth and advancement of someone less experienced, knowledgeable or mature.

With that broader definition of the mentor role in mind, and keeping in mind that it is this role that a parent must shift into, it is time to take a look at those specific communication techniques used by professionals.

General Communication Techniques

Setting the stage

We recommend that you find a time when you and your teenager are less likely to be interrupted and are not multitasking. It will be more effective, for example, if you (or your teenager) are not driving, watching TV, on the computer, washing dishes, doing housework, etc.

Choose a location that is comfortable, private and free of unnecessary distractions (e.g., cell phones).

Do not “double team” him³. He may become overwhelmed if both you and your spouse are present. With only one parent at a time talking with him, the communication skills discussed below will be more effective.

Listening and understanding

At this stage, it is more important to be a good listener than a good talker. Such a stance will not only help you be perceived as empathetic, but also allow you to gather important information. *Everything he says will tell you something about what is happening and why.*

Your first and continued efforts should be a sincere attempt to understand what he is concerned or upset about.

Your second effort should be to demonstrate to him that you are listening.

Your third effort should be to demonstrate to him that you do understand what the problem or issue is. (People in conflict want to be understood!)

Please note that demonstrating an understanding of his feelings and concerns does not mean that you are necessarily agreeing with his possible actions. The foregoing efforts are designed to set the stage for the mutual problem-solving that will occur later.

3. From here on, we use the masculine pronoun for simplicity, but these skills are equally effective for boys and girls.

Verbal Communication skills

Take your time; speak slowly.

Since your tone of voice indicates your attitude (regardless of what you are saying), try to adopt one that is calm and reasonable.

In choosing your words, try to avoid ones that you know are likely to activate negative emotions.

One should also avoid such verbal strategies as arguing, criticizing, jumping to conclusions, pacifying (belittling the situation), name calling (labeling the person or behavior) and ordering. (Houston PD Crisis Intervention Training Manual)

Since your initial objective is to foster open, honest communications between you and your teenager, your goals in this (first) conversation should be to: 1) attempt to understand clearly what he is concerned, upset or angry about, and 2) demonstrate to him that you do understand those concerns. Once there is ongoing communication, these same communication skills can be used to guide him in the direction of an acceptable solution to the problem.

Active Listening Skills

Frequently cited among the qualities of a good mentor is the ability to be an “active listener.” Descriptions and examples of the seven primary Active Listening Skills are provided below.

Identifying Emotions

People communicate on two levels: Content (the simple facts/circumstances) and Emotions (feelings about the facts/circumstances). Since your teenager’s emotional reaction and subsequent behavior are what might make the facts/situation a problem, train yourself to listen for the emotions surrounding the content. In the end, helping him learn to control his emotions will help him control his behavior.

A common statement heard in early conversations is: “You don’t (or can’t) understand what I am going through!” While it is probably true that you have not had exactly the same experience he has had, you have (almost certainly) had similar feelings sometime in your life. So, it is possible to understand someone else’s feelings without having gone through exactly the same experience. Pointing this out may help establish a commonality of feeling that will allow you to work around this seeming barrier to communication.

After “setting the stage,” and ensuring that both of you are paying full attention to each other, you can begin by *tentatively* identifying which emotion you think he is feeling and about which you are concerned. For example, you could say, “It *sounds like* something is very frustrating to you.” Or, you might try, “Something seems to have really made you angry.” Never *tell* him how he is feeling. That will almost certainly result in “You have no idea how I am feeling!” Whether he says this or just thinks it, the result will be a barrier to the goals of active listening.

If you tentatively identify his feelings, he might either confirm it (“Yes, I am mad at Jim for what he did!”) or correct it (“No, I’m not mad, I’m frustrated!”). Either way, you now have a better idea of what emotion he is feeling. On the other hand, he may respond with “You wouldn’t understand,” or, “Just go away and leave me alone!” or “It’s none of your business!” These types of statements often elicit the wagging of the parental finger, accompanied by “Don’t you talk to me that way, young man!” We believe that such a directive response by you at this time would decrease the likelihood of his opening up and talking about his feelings and what his problem is. Try to remember the earlier emphasis on embracing the role of a mentor for these types of discussions. Stating, in a non-authoritarian tone of voice, something like, “It does seem like you are pretty upset by something,” may avoid a breakdown in communication early on.

Open Ended Questions

*** (Here it’s important to remember that Active Listening Skills may at first feel awkward, sometimes even counterintuitive. But parents can take heart from the fact that these have been successfully field-tested for more than 30 years.)*

Once you have helped him identify the emotion, and the associated problem, the next active listening skill you can use is the open-ended question. For example:

“So tell me, how do you think this got started?”

“What happened at the party last night?”

“What led up to this?”

Using “how” or “what” at the beginning of the question will usually result in a narrative response, rather than a one-word answer. We suggest avoiding beginning the question with “why.” Generally, when we ask a person “why” in regard to his behavior (“Why did you do that?”), it implies criticism, and will often result in the answer, “I don’t know.” Using “What led up to this?” or “How did this start?” will get you the

same information as asking “Why?” but without implying judgment.

In asking questions, your tone of voice is as important as the actual words. You are trying to initiate a candid conversation, not grill him on what happened. And, as he is answering the question, listen! Don’t interrupt him to gather specifics. You will be able to fill in any gaps by asking additional open-ended questions.

Minimal Encouragers

Using common utterances, like “Uh-huh,” “Okay” or “I see,” can be a means of indicating that you are actively listening and that you understand what he is saying. The presence of only these minimal encouragers, however, can be construed as “passive listening.” We often see this when we are talking with someone who is involved in some other activity, like watching television. In those circumstances, the “uh-huhs” can be merely “social fillers” the other person is using to pretend to be listening.

Using direct eye contact and “setting the stage”—by not doing something else while talking—will help demonstrate that you are really actively listening.

Paraphrasing

After you have tentatively identified the emotion and used open-ended questions to elicit information about how the problem developed and how he actually feels about it, you can summarize, using paraphrasing, and put his story and his emotions in your own words. For example: “Let me make sure I understand. You are saying that (this happened) and you feel (this emotion) about what happened.”

Using paraphrasing will indicate two important things, namely that: 1) you have been listening to him, and 2) you have some understanding of the problem as he sees it.

Reflecting/Mirroring

Sometimes he may express his feelings very emotionally. For example:

“This is the worst day of my life!”

“Sometimes I just feel like smashing something!”

“John will be sorry for what he said!”

At this point in the discussion, we would suggest using reflecting or mirroring, where you simply repeat the gist of what he said with an implied question.

“The worst day of your life?”

“You just feel like smashing something?”

“John will be sorry for what he said?”

Notice that each example is a question, and one that is designed to keep the person talking about his or her feelings. It will be tempting to respond with something like: “Oh, Jim, you don’t really mean that!” (telling him how he feels) or “You had better not do that!” (ordering) or “John, things aren’t that bad!” (belittling the situation). In recommending that you not yield to the temptation to resort to these strategies, we do not mean to imply that you would accept his smashing something or retaliating for something someone else did. We merely point out that at this stage of the conversation, your primary objective is to keep him speaking openly and honestly with you. Later, once he believes that you do understand how he feels and what he is going through, he will be more likely to allow you to help him decide what the best course of action might be. The purpose of this early listening is to help your son or daughter move from an emotional, irrational state to one that is more logical and rational.

Effective Pauses/Silence

During the conversation, you do not have to have an immediate response to everything he says. It is okay to allow a few minutes to pass without either of you saying anything. This gives him time to reflect on what he has said, or perhaps begin to formulate some acceptable solution to his problem.

A deliberate introduction of silence might also provide a stimulus for him to continue talking and thereby give you more information.

For example, you might say something like, “Joe, from what you’ve said, I think I can see a possible solution to the problem,” and then deliberately stop talking. If you have already identified his emotions, used open-ended questions and paraphrasing, and he now recognizes that you do understand the problem he is dealing with and how he feels about it, he might respond with “What do you think would work?”

At this point, since he has asked you for your opinion, you could respond with something like: “What do you think would happen if you...?” or, “How do you think it would turn out if you...?” *Remember, you are attempting to help him solve his problem, not telling him what to do or fixing it for him.*

“I” Messages

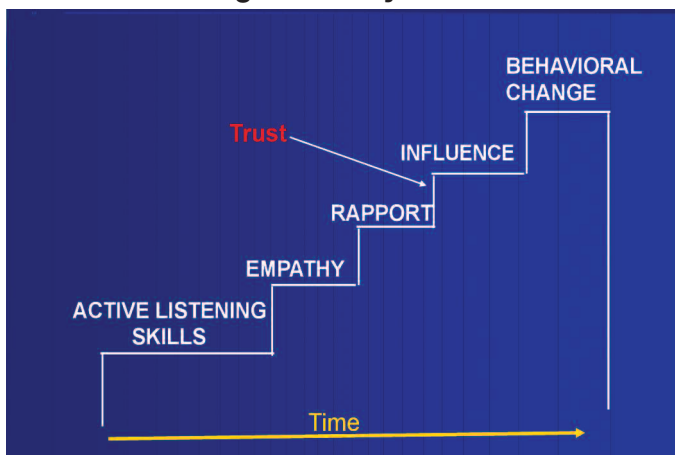
In the course of the conversation, he might say something that is of concern to you, particularly if it implies causing harm to himself or someone else. If that sort of statement occurs early in the conversation, we suggest delaying your response until you have had a chance to demonstrate to him that you have been listening and understanding. Once you are sure that he believes you, you can use an “I” message to respond to something that has caused concern.

The “I” message should contain these parts: “When you... (describe what he said), I feel... (state how you feel about it), because... (provide a reason for your reaction).” For example, if he indicated he might physically retaliate for something someone said or did, you could say: “Jim, when you say you are going to get Pete for what he did, I get concerned, because I believe that’s not the only way you can handle this.”

If he continues to state that he may respond inappropriately, you can say: “Jim, if you do that, what do you think will happen then?” He may respond with “I don’t know.” Here, you can say “I understand you don’t know, but what do you think might happen?” Once he has described what he thinks might happen if he responds a certain way, a logical follow-up question is: “And do you think that will make things better or worse for you?” In asking these questions, you are simply helping him recognize the possible consequences of his behavior and accept responsibility for his actions.

“I” messages can also be used to reinforce a positive statement that he has made. For example: “John, when you say that you will think about what we have been talking about, I feel relieved, because I believe you are a reasonable person.”

Behavioral Change Stairway



For a birds-eye view of what is happening while you are using the skills with your teenager, look at the chart below, left. It illustrates the desirable behavioral change process that can begin with the consistent use of Active Listening Skills:

- The teenager perceives that the person has empathy (identifies with and understands his feelings or difficulties);
- which develops rapport (a mutual liking, trust and a sense that they understand and share each other’s concerns);
- which allows trust to develop (someone will listen to him and attempt to understand his feelings and problems rather than just tell him what to do);
- which leads to influence (being able to affect his thinking and actions);
- which allows him to make better decisions.

Conclusion

Since the Columbine tragedy, many school shootings have been averted. Research on those incidents reveals that the development of close, trusting relationships with children and teens has been the key to preventing these tragedies. When students feel connected to at least one adult, they are more likely to break the code of silence and report their concerns about another student or about their own struggles. Through the application of the active listening skills highlighted in this article, these relationships can be formed and solidified. Sadly, not all school violence can be prevented, but there are proactive steps that parents and educators can take that will decrease the likelihood that a tragedy will occur. *The key is to keep listening.*

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Jeffrey A. Daniels, Ph.D., teaches in the Counseling and Counseling Psychology programs at West Virginia University, and studies school violence. His professional interests relate to perpetrator motive research, and over the past ten years he has conducted research on barricaded hostage-takings in schools and averted school shootings. He can be reached at Jeffrey.Daniels@mail.wvu.edu.

In his research into the nature of school violence, Jeff Daniels has found that *connectedness was the key element in both prevention and resolution*. For instance, in “The Successful Resolution of Armed Hostage/Barricade Events in Schools: A Qualitative Analysis”, he and his coauthors write, “The systemic condition most frequently mentioned by all participants was efforts by the school administration/staff to create a safe, comfortable environment that facilitates trusting and open communication between students and staff. Again, the development of meaningful relationships with students was viewed as important for creating this type of environment.”¹

They also emphasized the importance of *physical* connectedness; for instance, the presence of school personnel in the hallways during times when students were there. This physical presence gave the students a sense of being connected to a safe point. As one research participant put it, “...there’s that sense that there are people here who are going to intervene, and I think students know that.”

They further stress that “Participants consistently acknowledged that developing a trusting, open relationship with every student in the school was essential. The personal, caring relationship with all students and their families, including the perpetrator, was seen as one of if not the most essential role in facilitating a peaceful resolution.”

Translating research into practice, the authors list practical ways to achieve the sense of connectedness so essential to the vitality of the school and the prevention of violence. Specifically, they recommend:

- Spending time with and getting to know students outside of the classroom,
- “Hanging out” and talking with students in the hallways between classes,
- Coaching students on a team, and
- Eating lunch with students in the cafeteria.

Participants also reported that these trusting relationships allowed for and even encouraged students to confide in and report to teachers, staff, and/or administrators regarding any problems or rumors circulating throughout the school.

In addition to developing trusting relationships that encouraged students to confide in adults, this also allowed school personnel to better evaluate rumors and/or threats circulating in the schools.

Pertinent and detailed information can be found in the following articles by Dr. Daniels.

1. “The Successful Resolution of Armed Hostage/Barricade Events in Schools: A Qualitative Analysis.” Jeffrey A. Daniels, Mary C. Bradley, Daniel P. Cramer, Amy J. Winkler, Kisha Kinebrew and Deleska Crockett. *Psychology in the Schools* 44(6), 2007. Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com).
2. “A Content Analysis of News Reports of Averted School Rampages.” Jeffrey A. Daniels, Ilene Buck, Susan Croxall, Julia Gruber, Peter Kime and Heidi Govert. *Journal of School Violence* 6(1):83–99, 2007.
3. “Barricaded Captive Situations in Schools: Mitigation and Response.” Jeffrey A. Daniels, Terri E. Royster, Gregory M. Vecchi, and Erin E. Pshenishny. *Journal of Family Violence* 25:587–594, 2010.
4. “A Qualitative Investigation of Averted School Shooting Rampages.” Jeffrey A. Daniels,¹ Adam Volungis,¹ Erin Pshenishny,¹ Punita Gandhi,¹ Amy Winkler,² Daniel P. Cramer,³ and Mary C. Bradley⁴. *The Counseling Psychologist* 38(1):69–95, 2010.
5. “In the Aftermath of a School Hostage Event: A Case Study of One School Counselor’s Response.” Jeffrey A. Daniels, Mary C. Bradley, Daniel P. Cramer, Amy Winkler, Kisha Kinebrew and Deleska Crockett. *Professional School Counseling* 10(5):482–489, June 2007.

Addendum

A few points that were added or especially noted by participants during our September Teleseminar on *Breaking the Code of Silence*:

- Because lowering of violence is also linked to good relationships with students, personnel at all levels should make a point of learning something new about the kids every week.
- Students are an untapped intelligence source; they are the eyes and ears of the school.
- One principal's successful technique for encouraging students to share information was his reframing the concept of "snitch" to "telling in order to get help."
- In order for students to report, they have to trust that the adults will behave appropriately. They are more apt to talk if the adult is not trying to solve the problem but, instead, is listening fully to them. The adult needs to consciously convey non-coercive listening: not listening to get a result, but rather listening as a mentor or partner with the speaker.
- Schools that deliberately fostered a culture of dignity had lower rates of violence; the students themselves came to not tolerate disrespectful behavior among themselves.
- "School shootings are 100% preventable; we need to begin this training now."