

Our Kids Could Use Our Help

During the past week, counselors have been at work trying to help students at Platte Valley High School find some semblance of normalcy. Whatever you think of crisis counseling, dubbed “grief counseling” by the media, many believe that intervening at such times might reduce the risk of problems for some kids later on, and that makes it worth the effort. Still, it pays to remember that, whenever children have friends or family members die, they could use the support of caring adults long after the crisis has passed.

I am thankful for crisis teams who can help kids process the shock and horror of an event like a school shooting. (Remember when that wasn't a household term?) But, what about later, after all the public attention is gone, when kids return to their normal lives and have to face special days without the ones who died, moving toward adulthood, carrying that awful memory that robbed them of the innocence of childhood? Or what of the children in other schools? Some try not to think about it. Others have a hard time believing that it won't happen in their school, too.

There are some results of tragedy that will remain with children long after the crisis team has closed shop. Kids of all ages have their image of the world in which they live shattered, and struggle to put it back together again. Adults can't speak a language that makes sense to younger kids, so they avoid talking to us. And, try as we may, adults find it hard to convince teens to “talk it out” like we would do. They would rather hang with their peers, where they can talk as little or as much as they need without demonstrating to us how they feel. Truth is, we will never be able to share the perspective of a child when tragedy strikes, unless we have been through something similar. And, even then, each experience is unique. And the world of the child is much smaller than ours, so their perspective can be hard for us to relate to.

Children deserve the right to work through their losses with those who share their perspective on things, but that doesn't mean that adults are entirely helpless to do anything for them. Compassionate support, coupled with educating ourselves and our kids about the normal, natural ways we respond to loss and prepare for life after the loss, can make a difference in how young people approach the future. They will inherit the long-term task of defining policies, developing new practices, and creating new technology that will help the world address such problems in the future. For now, helping them to heal as well as possible is the greatest gift adults in their lives can offer them.

Unfortunately, recent events have shown us that we can't protect our kids from the pain of loss. But we can be a listening ear, a supportive presence, a friend who just wants them to know that they won't be forgotten after the dust has settled and everyone seems to have returned to their normal lives. They know all too well that their “normal” has been changed forever. I hope that we adults can find the courage and patience somehow to show our kids that we won't leave their sides, no matter how long it takes for them to discover what that new “normal” will be.