



Talking About Gun Violence with Autistic Individuals



THE AUTISM HUB AT UNC

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More Americans died of gun-related violence in 2021 than any other year on record¹, and thus, sadly, conversations about gun violence with autistic youth are likely necessary.

These conversations may relate to lockdown drills, and how the changes in routine and sensory experiences during those drills may result in feelings of being overwhelmed or worry. They may be linked to content children and youth hear on the news or in their environment, discussing acts of gun violence that may not directly affect them, but cause feelings of concern or anxiety. Finally, these conversations may be necessary with autistic children and youth who are directly impacted by gun violence and are processing their fear and grief. All of these conversations require thoughtful presentation of information, a safe environment, and consideration of the comprehension, social, and mental health needs of the children and youth.



We understand that gun violence is a highly sensitive subject and impacts communities differently. Consider your personal beliefs, parenting values, and what police involvement and/or response may look like for your community and/or background as you discuss gun violence with your child.

WHAT IS GUN VIOLENCE?

Gun violence is an aggressive and/or violent behavior that involves the use of firearms, whether it is a homicide, suicide, or an accidental shooting. Gun violence can take place in different settings, such as schools (referred to as school shooting where at least one victim was injured or killed²), workplaces or public spaces (referred to as mass shooting or mass murder, where a minimum of 4 victims were injured or killed, not including the perpetrator³), and homes.



HOW DO I START THIS CONVERSATION?

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to start this difficult conversation. In this toolkit we provide steps and resources (e.g., social narratives, visual supports, and coping strategies) for having this conversation.

1. Select a safe place and time
2. Use simple, factual, and developmentally appropriate language throughout the conversation to support their understanding of gun violence
3. Talk about ways to stay safe and prevent gun violence
4. Provide support if gun violence occurs close to home

While this toolkit is designed for family members talking with their autistic child about gun violence, school-based practitioners may find the ready-made resources for the steps above in this toolkit useful for addressing this issue in their classroom. Additional adaptations may be needed to meet the needs of an autistic individual.

Some of this content has been adapted from:

Hume, K., Waters, V., Dees, B., Rentschler, L., Sam, A., Steinbrenner, J., Kennedy, T., Tomaszewski, B., Reszka, S., Perkins, Y., Nowell, S., & Bossen, B. (2022). Resources for Autistic Individuals and their Families Impacted by War and Displacement. Chapel Hill, NC: School of Education, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, and Allied Health of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



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SELECT A SAFE PLACE AND TIME

Before selecting a place and time to talk with an autistic individual about gun violence, be sure to check in with yourself about what you are thinking and feeling about gun violence.

THINK ABOUT:

- What are my personal beliefs/values about gun violence?
- In general, how do I feel about talking about difficult and/or emotional topics?
- What does police involvement and/or response look like for my community and/or background?

When selecting a place and time to talk to an autistic individual, it is important to consider their unique sensory needs, preferences, communication mode, and schedule.

CHOOSE A CALM, FAMILIAR, AND SAFE PLACE:
Autistic individuals often have sensory sensitivities, such as lighting and/or noise, which may need to be considered during this conversation. Consider selecting a place that has natural lighting or soft lighting and that is free of or has very limited background distractions, such as music or other people talking. It is important to select a place that feels calming and provides a sense of safety.



When possible, ask them about places where they feel safe and calm to have this conversation. Or consider providing a choice board of places (e.g., a quiet park in the evening, a specific room at home) where they might feel safe based on what you know about them.

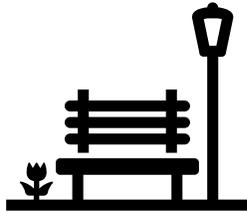
ADD THIS CONVERSATION TO THEIR SCHEDULE:
Autistic individuals may prefer to have routines, including a daily schedule. If possible, letting them know ahead of time about this conversation may be helpful. Ask them what time they would like to have this conversation. Or consider adding a 'conversation' card to their daily schedule.

RESOURCES INCLUDE:

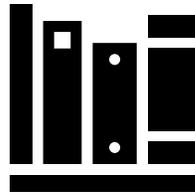
- Visual Support: Choice Board
- Visual Cue: 'Change' Card



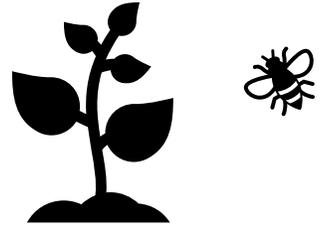
CHOICE BOARD



Park



Library



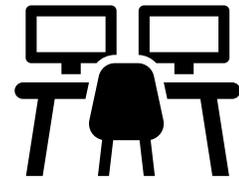
Backyard/Garden/Nature trail



Living room



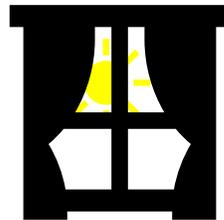
My room



Office/Study room



Kitchen



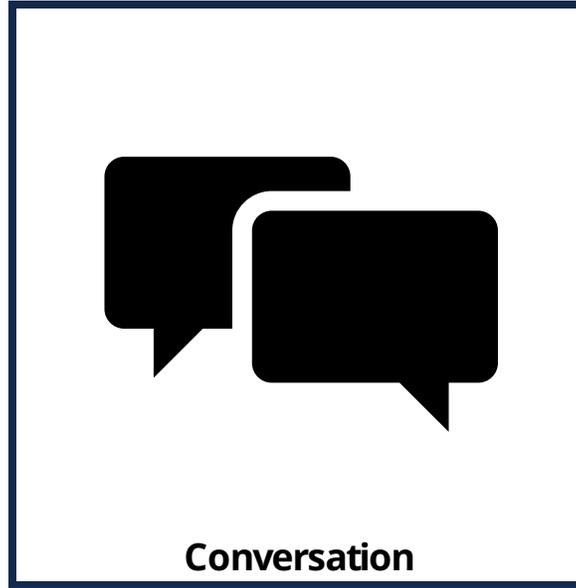
Sunroom



Porch/Deck



CHANGE CARD





USE SIMPLE, FACTUAL, AND DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE THROUGHOUT THE CONVERSATION TO SUPPORT THEIR UNDERSTANDING

Autistic individuals may have varied levels of understanding about gun violence due to their developmental level and/or proximity to a gun violence occurrence.

ASK WHAT THEY KNOW/HAVE HEARD:

Begin the conversation by asking them what they know and/or have heard about gun violence in school or from others. Ask them what they think about and what they feel about what they know and/or heard. Be sure to validate their thoughts and feelings and reassure them that they are safe.⁴

Communication may be challenging for autistic individuals, so be patient and understanding. Allow them time to process information and express themselves in their own way. This may include the use of AAC devices and/or visual cues. Consider using a social narrative to help them understand what they are feeling and that what they are feeling is okay, and that they are safe.

USE SIMPLE AND DIRECT LANGUAGE:

Describe what gun violence is in direct and clear language that is developmentally appropriate.⁴ Consider using social narrative to help them understand what gun violence is. Depending on developmental level, use accurate information and statistics to describe what gun violence is.



The following are suggestions for language to use based on age range.⁴ *These are only suggestions.* Consider your personal beliefs, parenting values, and police involvement and/or response. Pay attention to their emotional state and adjust language use accordingly.

- Preschoolers: *“Sometimes, a person uses a gun to hurt other people. That is not okay. Your teacher(s), community helpers, and I work hard to keep you safe.”*
- Elementary Schoolers: *“Gun violence is when a person uses a gun to hurt another person. It can happen at school, in public places, or at someone’s house. Using a gun to hurt another person is not okay. Your teacher(s), community helpers, and I work hard to keep you safe from gun violence.”*
- Middle Schoolers: *“Gun violence is a serious problem in our society. It*



happens when a person uses a gun to hurt and/or kill another person. This can happen at school, in public places in our community, or at someone's house. Using a gun to hurt and/or kill another person is a crime. Community helpers work together to create a community safe from gun violence."

- **High Schoolers & Young Adults:** *"Gun violence is a serious issue that affects our society. It happens when a person uses a gun to hurt and/or kill another person due to mental health issues, access to a gun, and/or beliefs about violence. This can happen at school, in public places in our community, or at someone's house. Using a gun to hurt and/or kill another person is a crime. You and me, along with community helpers, all have the responsibility to promote gun safety and prevent gun*

violence. If you want to take a more active role in preventing gun violence, we can look together for advocacy groups in your school and/or in our local community."



ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION:

Encourage them to ask questions. Listen to and validate their perspectives and feelings on gun violence. Continue to revisit this conversation and support their understanding as they change developmentally.

RESOURCES INCLUDE:

- **Social Narrative: Being Afraid I**
- **Social Narrative: Being Afraid II**
- **Social Narrative: Why Do Some People Hurt Others?**



BEING AFRAID I



Sometimes I might feel afraid or scared. It is okay to feel afraid.

I might feel afraid when there are loud noises, when I am away from home, or when something changes around me. I might feel afraid when I see other people who are afraid or upset.

When I feel afraid, I might feel like my stomach is upset or my heart is beating faster. I might want to hide or run.

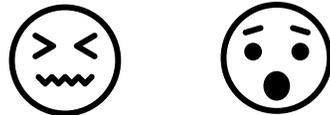
When I feel afraid, I can find an adult that I trust to help me. I can squeeze their hand or give them a hug if I want to. I can hug my own body to help me feel safe.

To help my body calm down, I can go somewhere safe with someone I trust. I can take deep breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth to help me breathe out the scary feelings.

It's okay to be afraid. When I am afraid, I can ask for help to calm down.



BEING AFRAID II



Sometimes I might feel afraid or scared.



It is okay to feel afraid.



I might feel afraid when there are



loud noises, when I am away from



home, or when something changes



around me. I might feel afraid when I



see other people who are afraid or



scared.



When I feel afraid, I might feel like my



stomach is upset or my heart is

beating faster. I might want to hide or



run.



When I feel afraid, I can find an adult

that I trust to help me. I can squeeze



their hand or give them a hug if I



want to. I can hug my own body to help



me feel safe.



To help my body calm down, I can go



somewhere safe with someone I trust. I



can take deep breaths in through my



nose and out through my



mouth to help me breathe out the scary



feelings.



It's okay to be afraid. When I am afraid, I



can ask for help to calm down.

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE HURT OTHERS?



Sometimes a person hurts another person. This could be because they:

- do not know how to express their anger or fear in a healthy way,
- are not well because of drugs, alcohol, and/or other mental health issues,
- do not know how to make good choices,
- feel humiliated, rejected, or excluded,
- want to feel important,
- are having or have had a difficult time, or
- do not understand what is right and wrong.

It is not okay to hurt someone.

There are people who want to help others and make a safe community. Helpers like my teachers and other school staff, therapists, doctors, and faith leaders, work with public safety helpers like the police, fire fighters, and paramedics, to get people the help they need and to keep them from hurting others.



TALK ABOUT WAYS TO STAY SAFE:

When discussing ways to prevent gun violence and to staying safe, it is important to continue to use language that is simple, direct, and developmentally appropriate. Consider using visual supports, such as a safety plan, to help autistic individuals understand the importance of being safe and what to do in case there is a gun violence occurrence.

PRACTICE GUN SAFETY & BE AWARE OF SURROUNDINGS:

According to Pew Research Center, 42% of households have one or more guns, with 66% of those households keeping guns in a locked place and 44% keeping guns unloaded.⁵ If you have a gun in your home, please adhere to the following gun safety guidelines to decrease inappropriate access, injury, and/or death:

1. Store the firearm unloaded.
2. Store the firearm locked.
3. Store the ammunition separated from the firearm.
4. Store the ammunition locked separately from the firearm⁶

When teaching gun safety, use clear and direct language, such as *"Guns are not toys. Do not touch them. Do not pick a gun up. If you see a gun, tell me, your teacher, or a nearby adult."*



When developmentally appropriate, teach autistic individuals what to look for or be aware of in their daily environments. Encourage them to tell a teacher if they hear someone saying that they are going to bring a gun to school or if they see someone other than the police with a gun.

SUPPORT UNDERSTANDING OF SAFETY DRILLS: Reassure your child that their school is safe.⁴ Most schools now practice 'Active Shooter' or 'Lockdown' drills. Reinforce and repeat in clear and developmentally appropriate language that their school practices these drills to keep them safe. Consider using social narratives or visual supports to support understanding of safety drills.

- Preschoolers: *"Active shooter or lockdown drills are for you to practice what to do in case you hear loud popping noises at school. Do what your teacher tells you to do so you can stay safe."*



- **Elementary Schoolers:** *“An active shooter or lockdown drill is something you practice to stay safe at school. Sometimes a person has come to school to cause harm to another person. During the drill, you practice staying quiet, hiding, and waiting for help. Do what your teacher tells you to do so you can stay safe.”*
- **Middle Schoolers:** *“An active shooter or lockdown drill is important to practice because it helps you and others stay safe at school. Sometimes a person has come to school to cause harm to another person. During the drill, you practice staying quiet, hiding, and waiting for help in case that happens. Listen to your teacher and follow their directions so you and others can stay safe.”*
- **High Schoolers:** *“An active shooter or lockdown drill is important way to practice staying safe in case someone brings a gun to school with the intention of harming or killing another person. During the drill, it is important for you to listen to your teachers instructions. Remember to stay quiet, hide, and wait for help. The drill may be stressful or scary for you. It is okay to feel this way. It is a stressful and scary situation. If you feel scared, remember to practice deep calming breaths. Your teacher is there to keep you and others safe.”*



WALK AWAY FROM CONFLICT THAT IS ESCALATING:

Not all conflict is negative. In fact, some conflict can lead to new or deeper understanding of something or result in a new innovative problem-solving skill. However, autistic individuals may have difficulty recognizing when a conflict is becoming a serious concern or a dangerous situation. Signs that a conflict is becoming dangerous include:

- Displays of intense emotions from one or more persons, such as anger or fear
- Use of threatening language verbally, such as yelling or someone saying they are going to hurt them, or physically, such as one person standing too close to another person, someone pointing in another person's face, someone closing their fists tightly, or someone throwing objects
- Physical violence, such as someone intentionally putting their body on another person through hitting,



pushing, or kicking to scare or harm another person

If developmentally appropriate, consider using pictures to show what escalating conflict looks like (resource included).



RESOURCES INCLUDE:

- **Social Narrative: Active Shooter/Lockdown Drill I**
- **Social Narrative: Active Shooter/Lockdown Drill II**
- **Visual Support: School Safety Plan**
- **Visual Support: Active Shooter Safety Plan**
- **Visual Support: Warning Signs of Escalating Conflict I**
- **Visual Support: Warning Signs of Escalating Conflict II**



ACTIVE SHOOTER/LOCKDOWN DRILL I



Sometimes a person enters a school with a gun to harm another person. I need to stay safe if this happens.

To stay safe, my school practices safety drills. This drill might be called an 'Active Shooter Drill' or a 'Lockdown Drill.'

During the drill, I need to listen to my teacher and follow their instructions so I can stay safe. My teacher will close and lock the door and turn off the lights. My teacher will tell me where to hide. This might be under my desk, in a closet, or bathroom. I need to stay quiet while I am hiding.

While I am hiding, I might feel afraid. When I feel afraid, I might feel like my stomach is upset or my heart is beating faster. It is okay to be afraid. When I feel afraid I can help my body calm down by hugging my body and deep breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth to help me breathe out the scary feelings.

Community helpers will tell my teacher when it is safe for me to stop hiding. It is important to practice drills, so I know what to do to stay safe.



ACTIVE SHOOTER/LOCKDOWN DRILL II



Sometimes a person enters a school



with a gun to hurt another person. I



need to stay safe if this happens.



To stay safe, my school practices safety

drills. This drill might be called an 'Active

Shooter Drill' or a 'Lockdown Drill.'

During the drill, I



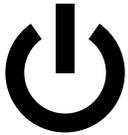
need to listen to my teacher and follow



their instructions so I can stay safe. My

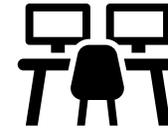


teacher will close and lock the door and



turn off the lights. My teacher will tell

me where to hide.



This might be under my desk, in a closet,



or bathroom. I need to stay quiet while I

am hiding.



While I am hiding, I might feel afraid.



When I feel afraid, I might feel like my



stomach is upset or my heart is beating



faster. It is okay to be afraid.



When I feel afraid I can help my body



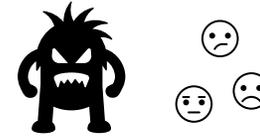
calm down by hugging my body and



deep breaths in through my nose and



out through my mouth to help me



breathe out the scary feelings.



Community helpers will tell my teacher



when it is safe for me to stop hiding. It is

important to practice drills, so I know



what to do to stay safe.



SCHOOL SAFETY PLAN

Be sure to check and/or add to IEP or 504 plans (emergency preparedness objectives are required and protected by the *ADA Act*⁷) specific details that the autistic individual needs during safety exercises (e.g., evacuation, lockdown, and shelter-in-place), such as noise-dampening headphones and/or a quiet fidget toy.⁸

1. Do not provide access to school building to others/strangers/people you do not recognize



2. Report strangers/people you do not recognize/suspicious activity/threats to a teacher and/or person in the front office



3. Identify an adult (at school or from the community) to seek help from if feeling threatened/scared/endangered



4. Listen to your teacher during safety drills so you know what to do





ACTIVE SHOOTER SAFETY PLAN

1. Keep calm by breathing deeply and if time and possible, grab comfort bag (noise-canceling headphones, comfort items, snacks, quiet fidget toys).



2. If by yourself, lock doors and windows. If possible, block the door. Turn off lights.



3. Find something to hide behind. This might be your desk, a closet, or a bathroom. If possible, hide behind something concrete on your hands and knees.



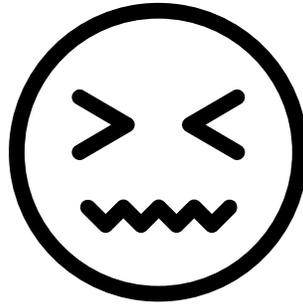
4. Be quiet. Stay hidden until community helpers say it is safe to come out.



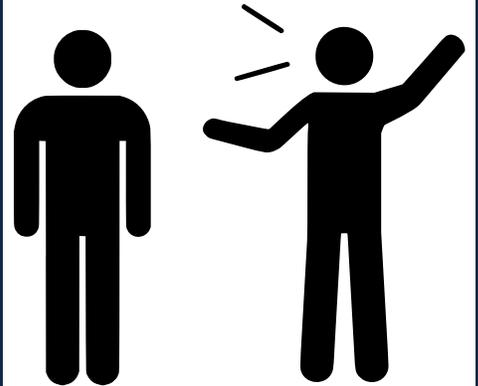
WARNING SIGNS OF CONFLICT THAT IS BECOMING DANGEROUS I



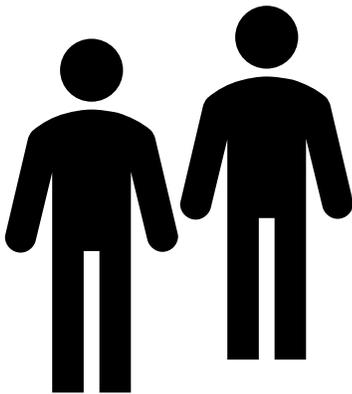
Anger



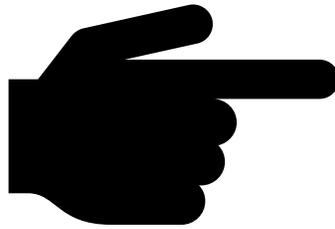
Fear



Yelling/Shouting



Crowding/Too Close



Pointing/Jabbing



Fist



Pushing



Hitting



Kicking

WARNING SIGNS OF CONFLICT THAT IS BECOMING DANGEROUS II



Someone is becoming very angry.



Someone is becoming very scared.



Someone is yelling.



Someone is threatening to hurt another person.



Someone is physically too close to another person.



Someone is close and is directly pointing in another person's face.



Someone is closing their hand tightly.



Someone is throwing something.



Someone is hitting another person.



Someone is pushing another person.



Someone is kicking another person.



PROVIDING SUPPORT IF GUN VIOLENCE OCCURS IN CLOSE PROXIMITY

While extremely unlikely, there is still a possibility that gun violence could occur nearby. In 2022 alone, there were 51 school shootings (at least one victim was injured or killed²) and 646 mass shootings (at least 4 victims were injured or killed, not including the perpetrator³) in the US.

Year	School Shootings ²	Mass Shootings ¹²
2018	24	336
2019	24	415
2020	10	610
2021	35	690
2022	51	646

If gun violence occurs close to your home, you may be worried or wondering if you should be concerned about your child’s mental and emotional health. Since no child is the same as another child, the answer is it depends on the child.⁹ Keep in mind that autistic individuals tend to have an increased likelihood of having anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns.¹⁰ Look for changes in their behaviors, such as sleep patterns, appetite, and/or communication style to determine if they are struggling to process the occurrence.⁴

MAINTAIN ROUTINES & PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE:

While it is important to create time and space to process the gun violence occurrence, autistic individuals may cope



best when daily routines are maintained because they can be a source of comfort.¹¹ Maintain routines, such sleep, mealtime, exercise, and/or attending school, as much as possible.⁴ Prioritize self-care by promoting the use of coping strategies and limiting access to media.⁴ Too much exposure to media may cause additional stress. Consider modeling the use of coping strategies, such as Dandelion Breathing, Soles of Feet or practicing yoga, to encourage self-care.

TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY KNOW/HAVE HEARD:

Ask them what they know and/or have heard about gun violence occurrence in school or from others. Ask them what they think about and what they feel about what they know and/or heard. Be sure to validate their thoughts and feelings and reassure them that they are safe. Seek additional support from family and friends and/or professional help, such as counseling or therapy services, if struggling to cope.



RESOURCES INCLUDE:

- **Social Narrative: Loss of a Loved One/Friend I**
- **Social Narrative: Loss of a Loved One/Friend II**
- **Visual Support: Calming Routine**
- **Visual Support: Mindful Senses**
- **Visual Support & Coping Strategy: Yoga Poses**
- **Visual Support & Coping Strategy: Soles of Feet**
- **Visual Support & Coping Strategy: Dandelion Breathing**
- **Coping Strategy: Expression Activities**
- **Additional Information**
- **Crisis Supports**

LOSS OF A LOVED ONE I



When someone I love dies, it means I will not see them again. It can be hard when I do not get to see people I love. There are things I can do to help me remember them.

I can think about them and the happy things we did together. I can talk to them in my head, or I can talk to other people about them.

When someone I love dies, I may have strong feelings. It is OK to feel sad, mad, or scared. When I have big feelings, it is OK to cry.

When I have big feelings, there are things I can do to help me feel better. I can take deep breaths. I can think about things that make me happy, and I can be with people I love.

It is OK to feel confused when someone dies. I can ask questions to help me understand. I can talk to others about how I feel.

Even though I lost someone I love, there are other people here who still love me. The people here who love me will help me feel better.



LOSS OF A LOVED ONE II



When someone dies, I will *not* see them



again. Instead, I can think about them in

my head.



When someone dies, it is OK to feel sad



or mad. When I am sad, it is OK to cry.



When I am sad, I can take deep breaths



and be with people I love.



The people here who love me will help

me feel better.

CALMING ROUTINE

1. Take 4 deep breaths



2. Clench fists 4 times



3. Count to 10

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. Good job!



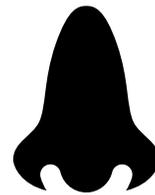


MINDFUL SENSES

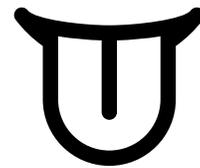
Think about something I like to look at.



Think about something that smells good.



Think about something I like to taste.



Think about something I like to listen to.



Think about something that feels good to touch.





YOGA POSES

With your mouth closed, take in a deep breath (inhale) through your nose and hold for 3 seconds, gradually working up to 10 seconds. Then breathe out (exhale) slowly through your mouth while saying 'Ahhhh.' Go through three deep inhale/slow exhale cycles per pose.



Tree



Crescent Lunge



Warrior



Cobra



Downward-Facing Dog



Mountain



Triangle



Plank



Cat

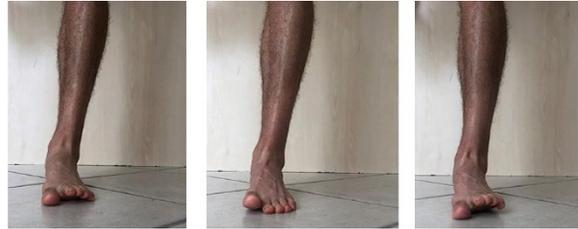
SOLES OF THE FEET¹³

When feeling sad or angry, you can focus on an object to help you cope through the feelings.

1. Stand with your feet flat on the floor



2. Move your toes



3. Feel your socks, shoes, or the floor touching your feet



4. Repeat as needed

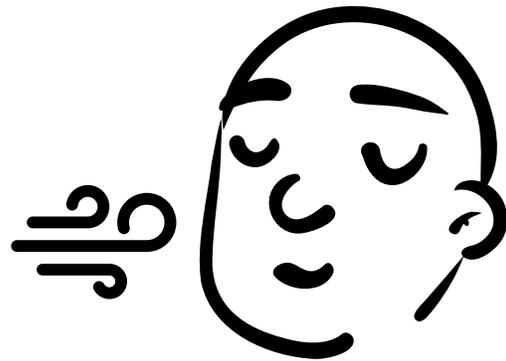


DANDELION BREATHING

Imagine you are holding a dandelion



Take a big breath in



Blow away all the dandelion seeds.





EXPRESSION ACTIVITIES

Journaling



Create a daily routine



Create a bullet journal:

- Write one line a day
- Add images
- List calming tips
- Track your mood
- Take a daily photo and describe what is happening



Video journal:

- Film 1 second daily
- Interview, talk about your mood, experiences...

Art



Draw

- Scribble stress away
- Draw with your eyes closed
- Think of a flower you would love to see and draw what you imagine
- Draw yourself as a superhero



Create a graphic novel or comic strip:

- What do you miss?
- What are you worried about?
- What are your hopes?



CRISIS SUPPORTS

Lifeline Crisis Chat (<http://www.contact-usa.org/chat.html>)

Provides emotional support, crisis intervention, and suicide prevention services

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255

IMALIVE (<https://www.imalive.org/>)

Crisis intervention, and suicide prevention services

Girls & Boys Town National Hotline

1-800-448-3000

National Alliance on Mental Illness HelpLine

Text NAMI to 741741

Warmlines (<http://warmlines.org/>)

Not in a crisis but just want someone to talk to.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION



National Alliance on Mental Illness

<https://www.nami.org/Home>



<https://www.bradyunited.org/>



<https://giffords.org/the-issue/>



<https://nationalallianceoftraumarecoverycenters.org/>



<https://www.nasponline.org/>



<https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/15-tips-talking-children-about-school-violence>



https://childmind.org/article/anxiety-school-shooting/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=hs-k_tx_event_2022-05-25&utm_content=anxiety-school-shooting#full_article

https://childmind.org/article/anxiety-school-shooting/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=hs-k_tx_event_2022-05-25&utm_content=anxiety-school-shooting#full_article



<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/terrorism-and-violence>



<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/24/716704917/when-the-news-is-scary-what-to-say-to-kids>



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19hezCkroHnezz5KNqWD2swE7RIZKRDkj/view>



<https://www.everytown.org/>



Save the Children.

<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/how-to-talk-to-children-about-school-shootings>



<https://www.apa.org/topics/gun-violence-crime>

<https://www.apa.org/topics/gun-violence-crime/shooting-aftermath>



<https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/violence/>



<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/showing-up-strong-for-yourself-and-your-students-in-the-aftermath-of-violence>



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We understand that gun violence is a highly sensitive subject and impacts communities from diverse backgrounds differently. Consider your personal beliefs, parenting values, and what police involvement and/or response may look like for your community and/or background as you discuss gun violence with your child.

These resources were developed due to the increasing prevalence of gun violence in the US, with some resources adapted from our *Resources for Autistic Individuals and their Families Impacted by War and Displacement* timely toolkit.

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