

Information for school staff:

Support for conversations with students about the tragedy in New Zealand

In these times of instant and continuous media coverage, the impact of the tragedy in Christchurch, New Zealand can be profound. We need to take care of ourselves, and of each other, in part so that we can be a source of strength for our students and their families.

In the coming days, there are a few things that we can do to provide support within our school communities.

Minimize exposure to details of the tragic event

School- and class-wide discussion of the events in New Zealand should be avoided, especially for primary and junior students, because many students may have already been overexposed to media/social media coverage of the event in recent days. Avoid discussing the details of the tragedy with colleagues, or listening to/watching media reports, when students are present. Repeated exposure to coverage can be confusing to children and can exaggerate the event further for them.

However, some of our students may raise this tragedy and it is important to know how to best respond. Naturally, any conversation with students must be developmentally appropriate.

Young children are not able to process the complexities of a situation in the same way as adolescents and young adults. They often gauge how threatening an event is by adult reactions (i.e., if caregivers act scared and frightened, young children will view the event as scary and frightening).

Older children and teenagers may have more information about an event as they are commonly able to access details via the Internet and television. For youth, it is important to discuss issues openly, emphasizing the efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools, and the critical role that students play by following school safety guidelines (e.g., reporting strangers, reporting threats made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

Here are some ideas for providing support, drawn from a number of reputable organizations that specialize in trauma response:

Watch for students who may be vulnerable

- Children who are struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the shooting may turn to trusted adults for help and guidance.
- Students who have been exposed to violence, or who struggle with anxiety, may be particularly vulnerable at this time. Keep an eye out for students who are experiencing intrusive thoughts about the events, avoidance or withdrawal, and/or persistent difficulty with attention, irritability, or nervousness.
- If you are worried about a student, consult with your principal and the appropriate support staff will be contacted.
- In all cases, normal school routines are very helpful for minimizing anxiety reactions.

Reassure our students

- Each of us can be a visible, welcoming presence at school. We can make an extra effort to greet students and parents as they enter the building next week.
- Reinforcing safety after this tragedy is important. Schools are supposed to be one of the safe places where students go to learn and be with friends. When situations of violence occur, sometimes our sense of safety is affected. Students need to hear the school is safe, and we will do everything we can to ensure it always is a safe place for learning and having fun with classmates.
- Highlight the features that make the school safe (lockdown drills, locked doors, sign-in procedures, etc.)
- Emphasize people's resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms with how they coped in daily life during difficult times. In age-appropriate terms, identify other crises people, communities or countries have recovered from.

Reassure our parents and families

- A warm welcome for visiting parents will be especially important next week.
- Reinforce that we remain focused on ensuring that all students, staff and members of the community feel safe, included and welcomed in Peel schools and worksites.
- If parents ask questions about school safety, share the positive initiatives underway and highlight safety procedures in place at the school. You can always direct parents to an administrator for more information.
- Be sure you are aware of our secure schools terms and protocols (lockdown, hold and secure, shelter in place) so that you can explain these to any parent who asks you.

This information is provided to help you to support your students, in case this issue arises in the coming days. If you require any further assistance, as always, please ask.