

VIEWPOINT

Deception in Schools—When Crisis Preparedness Efforts Go Too Far

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Without warning, police burst into classrooms in a middle school, sparking panic among seventh graders as they point loaded weapons at students, aiming to protect them from an active shooter. The panic spreads to parents as students send text messages to them during the attack.

Highway patrol officers go classroom to classroom in a high school notifying students that several classmates died in motor vehicle crashes over the weekend, sparking grief as peers first learn that students missing from the class that morning had died.

Both scenarios share one thing in common. Rather than taking steps to prevent these incidents, school officials and first responders misguidedly chose to create these experiences. Both scenarios were staged in schools—without the knowledge of the students or their families—with a stated intent of preparing students for potential future harm.

The first scenario was a planned, yet unannounced, lockdown active shooter drill. When numerous parents complained, officials justified their actions by comparing the deception with unannounced fire drills. They stated that such exercises were “vital in order to evaluate not only law enforcement response, but more importantly to educate the students and school officials in case an actual event were to occur.” One police officer explained, “How you train and how you prepare is how you’re going to react when everything goes bad.”¹

The second scenario was part of an exercise that was designed to dramatize the consequences of drinking and driving. The first responders and school officials intended to wait several hours until the students who were named as deceased showed up to school and the deception was revealed. However, some teachers felt the need to tell students earlier when students became overwhelmed with grief. Students reportedly screamed in anger at staff members when it was disclosed that they were intentionally misled about the deaths of their peers. One school professional stated: “They were traumatized, but we wanted them to be traumatized. That’s how they get the message.” At a later assembly, students held up signs that said: “Death is real. Don’t play with our emotions.”²

Schools remain among the safest environments for children and youth, and incidents of armed assailants in schools resulting in injury or death are still quite rare. However, many recognize the value of preparedness and remain concerned about the increase in such incidents. As of 2015, 6 states (Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Tennessee) require mandatory active shooter drills and 32 additional states require school drills for instances other than fire, an earthquake, or a tor-

nado. A legal review on school shooting simulations described the legislation as vague, allowing schools wide discretion in how these drills are conducted, including simulation drills that are conducted without advance notice from the school district.³ This has led to the concern that “high-impact active shooter drills...are becoming a new norm.”⁴ In some situations, schools have conducted such exercises to intentionally mislead the students and/or staff members to believe that they are true events under the belief that the element of surprise and fear best prepares students and staff members to take the most appropriate actions during a real attack. Given the rarity of actual attacks in schools and the practical and ethical barriers to empirically evaluating whether deception and associated fear would mitigate any mortality or morbidity, the evidence to support this view is lacking and unlikely to be forthcoming (and the evidence of the negative consequences of these approaches also remains based on anecdotal observations). Even if notice is given, it is likely that simulations involving theatrical makeup to represent gunshot wounds, gunfire or the use of blanks, and predatory acting by the mock shooter may still be highly traumatic.³

Similar issues should also be considered even if only adults are involved. For example, teachers in Oregon who were attending a meeting were shocked when 2 masked gunmen entered the room firing blanks—the teachers only realized it was not a real shooting when they noticed that they were not bleeding.⁵ Examples of unannounced live shooter drills have also been reported from other institutions, including those in health.⁶

The placement of crashed motor vehicles on school property, such as before graduation and prom, has long been used to visually reinforce the message that drinking and driving can have serious adverse outcomes. Some schools have decided to extend this to staging simulated funerals, or gone so far as to stage mock notifications of student deaths.

Participation in live drills and mock funerals, even when participants are fully informed, is likely to cause significant distress and psychological harm for some participants. Negative responses may become exacerbated among those with prior losses or trauma, anxiety or stress disorders, or other behavioral health problems. There is no evidence that simulated exercises that are highly distressing, such as those involving deception, are superior to other forms of drills for which students and staff members are aware they are being trained. Guidelines on how to facilitate drills that maximize the benefit of exercises while minimizing unintended distress are available.⁷ These guidelines indicate important considerations, such as the developmental maturity of the students, following a hierarchy

of simple discussion-based exercises to initiate before conducting complex operations-based drills and involving school mental health professionals during the planning and implementation phases. They also include the need to inform participants of the use of simulation before the drill and to provide opportunity for parents/guardians to opt their children out of participating.

Intentionally causing terror, distress, or grief, even if intended to prevent the likelihood of later death or disability, ignores our obligation to minimize the risk of both psychological and physical harm. We are aware of no evidence that live drills involving the deception of immediate risk of death and/or simulations that deceive children (or adults) of the death of friends helps prevent disability or death, but there is an extremely high likelihood (perhaps even a certainty) that it will cause significant emotional distress for some children. We know enough to make an informed decision in the best interests of children and youth.

We strongly recommend that schools and emergency response agencies explicitly prohibit using deception in live emergency preparedness exercises and related simulations (such as mock

funerals and death notifications) and instead require the mandatory notice of such drills to parents, students, and staff members.

Pediatricians should partner with school mental health clinicians and school administrators to ensure that policies are created that explicitly prohibit using deception in live crisis drills and mock death notifications in school settings. At the local level, pediatricians can request the current policies of the school districts in their communities and inquire about practices related to simulations and drills. At the state level, they can advocate that any legislation requiring school active shooter drills should follow best practice guidelines, such as those from the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of School Resource Officers.⁷ The authors, representing pediatrics, school psychology, and school administration, believe that using deception in live crisis drills and mock death notifications is both harmful and unethical. We encourage our professional organizations to inform their memberships that such practices are occurring, recommend that members take action at a local and state level, and as a professional organization, endorse best practice guidelines.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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