

What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About Preventing School Shootings



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School violence exists on a spectrum that encompasses bullying, threats, fights, and the carrying of weapons. Shootings sit at the far end, and most of them are not what people picture. Sometimes a gun goes off by accident, or sometimes a fight in the parking lot escalates. Community violence might follow a kid through the front door, or a student might die by suicide on campus.

Roughly 1 in 10 [school shootings](#) feature an attacker setting out to kill as many people as possible.¹ The lead up to such attacks tends to follow a recognizable arc, and parents need to understand it to help prevent it. The following are key indicators:

A Developmental Route to Violence²

- **Early childhood trauma.** The path usually starts young. Most school mass shooters have lived through something serious in childhood, such as physical or sexual abuse, a parent's suicide, or relentless bullying. Left unaddressed, trauma can feed the rage and despair that shows up later.
- **A slide into crisis.** Over months or years, the young person pulls away, gets angry, grows depressed and hopeless, and often becomes suicidal. Most school shooters design their attacks as their last act.
- **Self-hate turned outward.** The young person finds a target for their despair. Most school shooters attack their own school because they blame classmates or teachers for their own misery. Attackers who choose elementary schools are usually former students looking for the biggest possible headline. Every one of these attacks is staged to be watched.
- **Interest in prior attackers.** The young person begins to research earlier attacks—particularly Columbine—and to see themselves in the shooters. Online spaces where attackers are celebrated have made content about shooters easier to find and more intense.³ Most school shooters tell others about their attack beforehand and expect to be known for the shooting, whether by dying at the scene, being killed, or spending the rest of their lives in prison.
- **Access to a firearm.** Access makes the attack possible. Most school shooters are too young to purchase firearms themselves legally, so they take the weapon from a family member.

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Case Study: The Online Fandom Behind Recent Attacks

In July 2026, a judge in Barrow County, Georgia, sentenced the 2024 Apalachee High School shooter to life without parole. The boy was 14 when he killed two students and two teachers. He had not been bullied at that school. He did not know a single person he shot. The judge said the attack was done for infamy.⁴

Prosecutors played recordings of the boy's calls from jail to prove the point. He asked his mother to read him posts about himself. He wanted to know where he ranked against other shooters. He told her he was in the big leagues. The day after his sentencing, new fan videos about him went up on TikTok.

He was active in what participants call the True Crime Community (TCC), an online fandom built around mass killers.⁵ It behaves like any other fandom. Members make memes and video edits, draw fan art, learn the birthdays of attackers and the anniversaries of attacks, incorporate attacker names into usernames, and argue over who belongs in the top tier. The Columbine attack is the founding text.⁶

TCC is not a website or a group with a membership list; rather, it is a set of ideas that lives on common platforms, including TikTok, Discord, Roblox, Reddit, Tumblr, and X. Parental controls miss most of it because the content does not look like what filters are trained to catch. Much of it is cute on purpose. Soft pink backgrounds, cartoon stickers, and blood rendered as decoration mask the violent content.

Analysts have tied more than 20 attacks and disrupted plots to TCC since the start of 2024.⁷ The median age of those involved was 17. Cases have been documented in Canada, Brazil, Germany, Turkey, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Mexico. On the 2026 anniversary of Columbine, for example, a shooter attacked visitors at the Teotihuacán pyramids in Mexico while carrying an AI-generated photo of himself standing with the two Columbine killers.

Teenagers experience a push and pull to participate in these forums. The push is ordinary misery, isolation, bullying, depression, and family challenges. The pull comes in two forms. The first is belonging. For an isolated kid, getting engagement on a post or being sent an invitation to a private chat offers a sense of community. Once the kid is inside the community, bad actors seek to reframe his experience in the real world. They feed him the message that he is being bullied just like the past shooters were bullied. Violence was the shooters' reasonable answer to bullying, and it can be his response too. The second pull is the thrill of the forbidden—of knowing symbols and jokes would horrify any adult in the room.

Two things about these online communities surprise most parents. First, there is usually no ideology. The Antioch High School shooter copied long passages of his manifesto from neo-Nazi channels, but the shooter's actual diary reflected a boy who hated his own face, fought with his family, and wanted to die. The politics were borrowed decoration.⁸

Second, a grievance is not required to start down the path to violence. One mother learned that her 14-year-old had begun watching gore videos of graphic violence to prepare himself in case there was ever a shooting at his school. He kept watching and going deeper. She spent two hours going through his phone the night she found out and said she still has nightmares about what she saw.

Access to weapons, however, is key. The father of the 2024 Madison, Wisconsin, shooter, who is now an icon in TCC circles, kept his guns in a safe. But he also told his 15-year-old daughter that the combination was his Social Security number backward. On the night before the attack, he handed her a gun to clean in her bedroom and could not say afterward whether it had gone back in the safe.⁹

A word of caution: Plenty of teenagers go through dark stretches. They might like horror, watch true crime documentaries, or post grim jokes. None of the behaviors mean a child is dangerous. They mean that a conversation about the child's interests is needed. The fastest way to drive a struggling kid deeper into a dangerous community is to offer judgment and humiliation rather than compassion.

What Parents Can Do

To be effective, violence prevention efforts must be layered. They must aim to address the pathways and root causes that lead to violence, not just reduce casualties once a shooting starts. Parents should recognize that the most likely shooter at their child's school would be a current student or former classmate in crisis. The following are steps parents can take to help prevent violence:

1. Store guns safely and encourage others to

do so. Most school shooters use a family gun that was not secured.

- Keep guns locked and unloaded with ammunition stored separately, and make sure the combination or key is not shared with your kid. Ask yourself this question: "Could my child access my gun today if he or she wanted to?"
- Ask other parents about gun storage before you send your child to a friend's house. It can be briefly awkward, but the awkwardness will pass: "Before I drop him off, are there guns in the house, and how are they stored?"
- Give your child clear instructions on what you want them to do if a friend accesses a gun while they're hanging out (i.e., tell an adult, call to be picked up).

2. Train yourself in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

Programs such as Mental Health First Aid, QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), or ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) teach adults how to recognize the signs of a mental health crisis and how to intervene before it escalates.¹⁰ Because the pathway to violence often runs through despair and suicidality, parents who can spot and respond to a crisis early are positioned to intervene in the lives of young people.

3. Know the warning signs.

Many attackers tell others about their intent beforehand through social media posts, gaming chats, or forums; they also often study and reference past shooters as a kind of blueprint.¹¹ Parents benefit from

understanding the platforms their kids and classmates use, watching for fixation on violence or prior attackers, and knowing how to report concerning content to platforms or authorities.

4. Talk to children in your life.

Open, nonjudgmental conversations make it more likely a child will disclose their own struggles or share concerns about a peer who seems to be in crisis. Regular check-ins about school, friendships, and online life can help parents catch isolation, bullying, or despair before it hardens into something more dangerous. Some tips for conversations:

- **Assume exposure.** Do not ask *whether* a child has seen a gore video or heard about a real shooting. Rather, ask when the first time was, how it made them feel, and whether they slept that night.
- **Stay calm.** Your reaction to what a child tells you will determine whether they tell you anything again. You can be alarmed later. In the moment, just be curious.
- **Watch with them, not over them.** Have a child show you their feed. Explore games and servers together. Who do they game or chat with?
- **Learn the symbols and then ask.** Check posters, shirts, wallpapers, usernames, avatars, and profile pictures for recurring motifs and references. Photograph anything you do not recognize and run a reverse image search. Then ask a child what it means to them rather than deciding for them.

5. Talk to your child's school.

Advocate for evidence-based violence prevention in your local school. Schools often invest in physical security first because it is visible and makes people feel safe; however, it does the least to protect against a student who already attends the school. Instead, advocate for crisis intervention, suicide prevention, threat assessment teams, and anonymous reporting systems.

Know When and How to Act

Call 911 if there is an immediate threat.

Call or text 988 if a child in your life is in crisis or talking about suicide.

Call your local police, call your local Federal Bureau of Investigation field office, or file a complaint with the [Internet Crime Complaint Center](#) if you find evidence that a child in your life is being coerced or exploited online.

If you are merely worried but not yet sure about what, start with your school's counselor or threat assessment team.

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