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### Making School a Safe Place

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## Why Social Bonding Is a School-Safety Priority

*Christine Eith and Kenneth Trump*

**In enhancing school security, school leaders should not overlook the importance of connection.**

Imagine being a 6th grader at a new school. After five months of attending class, three of your four teachers still regularly misspell your first name. While most your classmates work for several days in a succession on projects for a state competition, you and two other students not involved from the onset of the projects are directed to silently read a book all day in another room. And when, one day in the cafeteria, a student in your class knocks you to the ground and you hit your head, the principal tells your parents, "Don't feel like your child is being systematically targeted. David bullies everyone and has been suspended three times for it. If he doesn't shape up ...."

How connected would you feel to your new school?

Set aside student-to-student behavior for a moment. Look at the adult behavior in this real-life example presented to us last spring. Are we, as classroom educators and administrators, creating the social bonds and connectedness for students that research tells us is critical for creating safe schools?

As school-shootings and other acts of higher-profile violence continue to be perpetrated on school campuses, and in our communities, many schools are looking to security hardware and preparatory emergency drills to create a greater sense of safety. But while physical security measures are clearly important, they play only one part in making schools safer—and in isolation they can have the opposite effect. Schools must also focus more closely on the individuals they are trying keep safe, and the overall well-being that comes from a climate which promotes connection to school and pro-social activities.

There are very sound and evidence-based approaches to increasing school safety that cost much less and have greater return on investment than intensive security upgrades. They focus on building connection, inclusion, and commitment within the school environment.

Too often, it is only after a terrifying, high-profile act of violence takes place in school that we begin to ask the question about the root causes of such incidents. How can we be more proactive in creating conditions in our schools that might reduce student withdrawal and isolation, or better support students undergoing social-emotional issues?



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## Social Bonding and Connectedness

A big part of the answer is that we must focus more on connectedness within schools. Empirical evidence over the last 20 years underpins the importance of school connectedness, also known as social bonding, to creating positive school climates. In schools where bonding is prioritized, research clearly shows a reduction in discipline citations, better student-teacher relationships, and a lower-levels of fear and anxiety related to negative stereotypes (Goyer et al., 2019).

Sociologist Travis Hirschi (1969) broke out four elements of the social bonding process: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, with each element contributing to the overall socialization and well-being of individuals within society. How do each of these elements translate to the school environment? Here are some ideas:

*Attachment*, the connection between individuals within the school environment, is often associated with pro-social connections with peers, teachers, and or one or more adults within the school; this could include bus drivers, counselors, or school resource officers. This is often fostered by reciprocation of friendships among peers and a perception of consistent care by adults. Consistently letting a student know you care and are interested in them as an individual is a key to building this connection.

*Commitment* is the investment one has in school activities and one's own learning. This can be seen through the time and energy a student puts into his friendships, schoolwork, and engagement with teachers and school staff.

*Involvement* is about engagement in conventional activities; the more opportunities a student has to engage in school activities, including "special" projects assigned by the teacher, or other extracurricular activities, the more likely one will feel engaged and connected to school and their peer group. (Even the opportunity to clean off the whiteboard or pass out an activity can mean the difference in a student withdrawing versus being attached and involved.)

Finally, a student's *belief* in the shared norms and behaviors of the school will more likely lead to rule following and not causing disruptions. Observing, rather than just being told that rules are equally applied to all students, is key to building belief.

In boosting social bonding in schools, we must also consider teachers' and administrators' ability to support one another. Indeed, the quality of adult connectedness has exponential benefits to students' academic and socioemotional growth (Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Teachers must also be given the time to build reciprocal relationships and share successes as well as challenges in order to feel safe and supported in their buildings. In short, the greater the positive connections among teachers, students, and administrators, the greater the perception of safety within their school environment.

## Social Bonding and Perceptions of Safety

While there is no uniform definition of a "safe school," we do know that schools exhibiting positive relationships between teachers and students, as well as among teachers, administrators, and staff, are more likely to be perceived as safe (May, 2018). This safety is built on social connection and engagement, as well as a trust in equitable opportunities for involvement and enforcement of the rules. The result is a reduction in social isolation and loneliness, which have been identified as threats to safety and well-being, especially when externalized, and are often identified as key turning points for individuals who commit acts of violence. Indeed, in the literature on school violence, the most common characteristics identified as risk factors for violent behavior speak to a lack of connection or attachment. They are:

Poor or deteriorating school performance.

- Change in school attendance.
- Feelings of isolation.
- Withdrawal (in person or on social media).
- Inability to set goals.

It is important to note that violent behavior is not always an external action. It can also result in feelings of depression or anxiety and self-harm. This is especially evident in middle school and the early transition into high school. In school safety consultations we've conducted, middle school teachers consistently identify "anxiety" as their top safety concern over potential school shootings. School administrators, meanwhile, reported increased concerns about suicide ideation and having completed substantially more suicide-risk assessments over the last 12 months than in years past.

## School Safety Plans with Heart

Climate and cultural improvement start at the top. Superintendents, central office leaders, and principals set the tone and context for teachers and support staff. In our urgent efforts to make schools safer, it is critical for school leaders to balance the focus on hardening school security with initiatives to increase connectedness and reduce isolation in schools.

Increasing connectedness within a school does not need to be a capital investment. The key investments are time and attention. Increasing connectedness can begin with steps that foster a climate that promotes the elements of social bonding within schools' overall safety efforts:

*Greet students by name each day.* Be visible outside of school as buses arrive and in school hallways to enthusiastically welcome students to school each day. Engage students by name as they enter the school and their classrooms. Converse with students during lunch periods and recess rather than simply observing them from a distance. Show students you recognize and know them as individuals. As building and district administrators, be sure to personally acknowledge and engage with teachers and support staff as well.

*Include social-emotional agenda items in school safety and crisis committee meetings.* Supervision, drills, and first-responder relations are important items for committee agendas. But be sure to also discuss strategies for strengthening social-emotional safety at each meeting, too.

*Engage school support staff in school safety planning and training.* Your school secretary will be the first person to receive a bomb threat call or deal with upset parents. The school custodian may be the first to encounter a stranger on campus. Cafeteria staff engage with many students each day. School bus drivers are often the first and last school employees to interact with students daily. Support staff need to feel connected to their school and to the instructional and administrative staff. Be sure to include these and other school support staff on safety committees and crisis teams, and in school safety training programs.

*Use tabletop exercises to build stronger connections among administrators, teachers, support staff, first responders, mental health support teams, and other stakeholders.* Having diverse teams work through hypothetical emergency scenarios can strengthen mutual respect and bonding. The process of collaborative problem-solving, even under a bit of stress, helps build team bonding and relationships that need to be in place if a real crisis strikes your school.

*Collectively debrief safety drills, exercises, and incidents that occur at school.* Dedicate time to talk to students and parents about the school safety plans and encourage teachers and students to talk about the experiences. Engage with parents and students to let them know what to expect and allow them to be seen as individuals who have feelings about this topic. More important, make sure there is time after a drill for teachers and students to talk about what they just experienced and how and why this is part of the schools' plan to keep them safe. Building this time in will help facilitate connectedness and strengthen social bonds through

recognizing that these drills are stress inducing and can trigger emotions that could prevent students and teachers from focusing on the work for a short time.

*Engage students in school safety planning and promote student ownership of school spaces.* Have students conduct their own school safety assessments to identify physical spaces and issues on campus that raise their safety concerns. Ask for their input on what specific steps they would take as principal or superintendent in charge of their schools. Use hallway and classroom walls, display cases, and other school spaces to showcase student artwork, writing, and awards to create student ownership of the school.

*Ensure that students have access to social and mental health supports while in the school building.* Committing well-being resources to serve students reinforces the safety of the schools and offers students who do not feel safe or need additional support resources to build stronger attachments and foster their well-being. Teachers spend a significant time with their students each day and having a safe place to refer a student who may need support demonstrates to that student that (1) the teacher cares and (2) there is a safe place to find help.

*Engage parents in school-safety planning.* Communicate to parents at the beginning of school the types of school safety drills their children may experience during the school year. Dedicate at least one parent organization meeting to discussing child and school safety concerns and resources. Include at least one paragraph about safety issues and resources in every parent newsletter. Dedicate a page on the school's website to highlight your school's focus on student safety and safety resources for parents and students.

*Promote open communication, collaboration, and respectful behavior.* Clearly articulate behavior and academic expectations and follow through with equitable supports and responses. It is important that students see that behavioral expectations are upheld equally for all students to ensure a belief in the rules. Students who also observe cohesion and connection among the adults in the school are more likely to find the space safe and will be more likely to build healthy attachments.

*Recognize students as learners and unique individuals who want to contribute to the learning environment.* Encourage opportunities for pro-social, reciprocal engagement among peers in the classroom, during field trips, and through extracurricular activities. Some of the most successful teachers we have worked with have built trust and connection with students by remaining curious and asking questions about who they are as individuals. Ensuring that students have the opportunity to engage in their learning through social interaction and involvement will foster commitment to learning and also provide the opportunity for teachable moments in the course of shared experience. Teachers who welcome every student into the classroom, engage each student in their class, and show that every student has value even through assigning jobs or responsibilities before or after class can find a more cohesive and safe classroom.

## A Safer Environment

Social bonding is a necessary and critical condition for safe schools. While it does not require any specialized technology or hardware, it does require leadership and a personal commitment to the well-being of our school communities. The idea that we not just know one another, but care enough to engage with one another, is powerful. When we build effective bonds, it helps us to support one another through challenges and collaboratively build a safe and healthy environment.

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