

It Is Time to Make Our Schools Safe

AACAP Child Maltreatment & Violence Committee
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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's Child Maltreatment and Violence Committee supports the voices of the youth survivors of the Parkland school shootings. In recent years, there have been a number of school shootings with assault weapons, resulting in too many children's and educators' deaths, as well as countless injuries and victims suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The future of our children and their safe education is our homeland security. The Parkland teens and youth across the country are demanding reasonable regulations of handguns and rifles, and a ban on sales of automatic/semi-automatic weapons and high capacity bullet magazines to civilians. The students' strong, rational voices, their ability to advocate peacefully for their environment and a future free of gun violence, their courage in speaking up, and their altruism are all factors associated with resilience to PTSD. If we as a society fail to support their efforts, we will be contributing to their demoralization, their ongoing PTSD, and the deaths, injuries, and psychological trauma to many more children, adolescents and innocent adults.

Assault weapons are not handguns for self-protection, nor are they rifles for hunting. They are weapons of war made for killing as many enemy soldiers as quickly as possible. Public education teaches our children that we live in a civilized representative democracy, not a police state. The idea of arming teachers is not only beyond the scope of their jobs, it is simply absurd. We need a rational approach to school safety which may include increased security, including metal detectors, police in the school, increased access to mental health resources and the broader ability to commit individuals who show signs of severe disturbance so they too can receive an evaluation, treatment, and be productive civilians.

The majority of US citizens, including gun owners and many NRA members, agree with the rational regulation of firearms. We need to honor the children who died and those who suffered at Columbine, Sandy Hook and Parkland, and so many other school shootings, by standing and marching with them, by calling on our representatives in Congress and demanding the strict enforcement of existing laws pertaining to the purchase, ownership, and storage of firearms. We need to demand firearm safety measures such as trigger locks, extended waiting periods, mandatory background checks for all transactions related to gun ownership, as well as stronger laws designed to protect children and reduce the incidence of gun related violence, such as the restriction of sale of guns to minors and use of guns by minors except for those certified to have appropriate training in their safe use (e.g., for hunting or target practice) and even then, only with direct adult supervision. In short, we need to voice that all children have the right to a safe education. If we as a society fail to do this, we will be contributing to increased rates of PTSD, death and a homeland that is neither educated nor secure. Although there are mental health aspects to this crisis, this epidemic is primarily caused by a lack of reasonable gun laws. To frame it as primarily a mental health issue is deceitful and an attempt to distract society from the primary cause which is too many military style weapons and high capacity magazines easily accessible to civilians.