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**Summit  
Public  
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**Nathan N. Parker, Ed.D.**, Superintendent of Schools

August 2, 2010

Dear Parents,

We have all been saddened by the tragic death of Mr. Abelino Mazariego. All in the community are keenly aware of the events as reported by the Union County Prosecutor and many attended the Interfaith Council Memorial Service held at the Village Green.

Some parents have asked school officials how best to discuss the events with their children. Attached are guidelines that may be helpful in responding to questions and concerns from your children. All information regarding the incident should be addressed to the police department or to the Union County Prosecutor's office.

If you have a question about your child's response, please contact your respective school principal. Some are on vacation so if you are unable to get through directly, please contact the high school guidance office for assistance at (908) 273-3414.

I hope that you find these guidelines helpful. We express our condolences to the family and friends of Mr. Mazariego.

Sincerely,

*Nathan N. Parker*

Nathan N. Parker  
Superintendent of Schools

Attachment

# Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers

High profile acts of violence can confuse and frighten children who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved-ones are at risk. They will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel can help children feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security and talking with them about their fears.

**1. Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that our schools and community are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

**2. Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.

**3. Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**

- **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their community and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of general safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.

- **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy and rumors. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.

- **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make our community safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining a safe community by following general safety guidelines (e.g. reporting strangers, reporting threats to the safety made by community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to adults either in school or the community, and accessing support for emotional needs.

**4. Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school, around town and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.

**5. Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for

severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

**6. Limit viewing or reading about these events.** Access through the internet to all manner of information, inaccuracies, inflammatory postings should be monitored and corrected as appropriate. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.

**7. Address stereotypes.** Many times sweeping negative stereotypes may be discussed in the aftermath of violence which may have a deleterious effect on our community. The violent act of an individual should not be viewed as proving something about a group -- encourage children to recognize and combat this kind of thinking.

**8. Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their work and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

### **Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children**

- **Our community is generally a safe place.**
- **We all play a role.** Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened.
- **There is a difference between reporting, tattling or gossiping.** You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- **Don't dwell on the worst possibilities.** Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the **possibility** of something happening and the **probability** that it will affect any of us.
- **Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand.** Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying about the event.
- **Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others.** They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
- **Violence is never a solution to problems.** Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

**Adapted from guidelines of the National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway #402, Bethesda, MD 20814**