Returning to School Following School Violence: Ideas for Parents

Most families will elect to have their child return to school following a shooting. The question of how to return to school has strong research behind it, and this handout will give parents some ideas to consider.

Children who return to schools following mass violence have stronger long-term academic, emotional and social outcomes. Evidence-based exposure protocols systematically help children re-engage with an educational environment.

Exposure therapy is widely considered a first-line, gold standard intervention for helping children overcome severe anxiety following school shootings, trauma-related school avoidance, and PTSD.

When a child displays reluctance about returning to school, we should avoid "flooding" or forcing immediate full-time re-entry. Instead, apply graduated exposure to build a customized step-by-step plan with the child. A sample plan might look like this:

	Sample Exposure Step	Why it helps
Phase 1	Looking at photos of the school; talking about the building	Makes first reminders of school feel less upsetting
Phase 2	Driving past the school; sitting in the parking lot with a parent or trusted caregiver	Practices staying calm near school, from a safe distance
Phase 3	Walking into the school during quiet time to meet a trusted teacher	Helps the building feel safe and familiar again
Phase 4	Attending for a single partial class, building up to half-days, then full days, then full weeks	Helps your child get comfortable in class and back to their usual routine

If your child does not feel ready to return, focus on small steps forward towards re-entry and staying for longer and longer periods. Individualized plans may be needed, but the goal should always be about moving forward in small exposure steps.

Some children will take longer than others to work through a plan like this. Families should be given the freedom to step their child up in a way that works best for the child. Children with special needs may require additional steps before they are ready.

In crisis? Call or text 988. Emergency: 911.

The timing of when to return depends on a number of factors. Parents can consider these pieces in their decision making:

The Two-Week Rule: Experts caution against early emotional processing or forced trauma remembrance in the immediate aftermath (0-14 days). The initial focus should be on Psychological First Aid (PFA), safety and stability.

Caring for Yourself Helps Your Child: You are one of the most important supports in your child's return to school. Your own feelings about what happened matter, so please get support for yourself too. It can be tempting to let an anxious child stay home, and that relief is understandable, but small brave steps work better over time. Working with a therapist as a family can help you encourage those steps.

Is the School Ready? There is no single timeline that works for all schools following a violent incident. Once the environment has been cleaned and repairs completed, parents should inquire about whether staff have had adequate trauma training, and if there are additional safety and administrative measures put in place (SROs, additional locks or other safety devices). Surveys and community listening sessions are important pieces in determining when a school is ready for students to return.

Take Cues From Your Child: Be on the lookout for your child's signs. They may be different from your child's peers. Watch nonverbal behaviors like sleeping, eating, and emotion regulation. Children who are reluctant to return to non-school activities may not yet be ready to return to school. Seek mental health guidance and ideas from your school staff if you have lingering concerns.

Resources for additional information: National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), nasponline.org; National Center for School Safety, nc2s.org; Bend Resilience Project provider directory, bendresilienceproject.com/providers/

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