

In wake of shooting, parents advised to 'gently open the door to discussion'

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Montreal Island and off-island schools spent the weekend lining up experts and drafting advice in case schoolchildren or their parents wanted to talk about the killing of 20 elementary schoolchildren and seven adults in Newtown, Conn. In the end, few children spoke to their teachers about the massacre, school officials said.

"I've spoken to some of the teachers," said Steven Erdelyi, principal at Hampstead Elementary School. "Only a few children have brought up (the massacre)," he said Monday. Erdelyi, father of a 5-year-old and a 2-year-old, said he and his wife, a teacher, decided against telling the older child about the mass killings.

"Most of what I've read," he added, "suggests that under age 7, children are too young to understand. For older children, they should be allowed to initiate a discussion."

Rosemary Reilly, an associate professor in the department of applied human sciences at Concordia University, agreed adults should be open. "Parents are walking a tightrope. They need to gently open the door to a discussion, asking if the child has anything they want to talk about, or want to know. A parent can say, 'I'm here and ready to listen to you.' "

She said it's a mistake to assume that because children aren't talking about something they aren't thinking about it.

At the Lester B. Pearson School Board, elementary school doors are locked, Suanne Stein Day, board chairperson, said. Only authorized personnel grant access to schools. Stein Day said schools practise evacuation procedures and two lockdown drills a year.

Ensuring students feel secure was a major goal of school boards across the province Monday.

"Unfortunately, we're a province where there have been major incidents in schools," said Rob Buttars, interim director general of New Frontiers School Board in Chateauguy, listing Ecole Polytechnique where in 1989 14 women were murdered, Concordia University, where 20 years ago a professor killed four adults, and Dawson College, where a man killed a student in 2006. Robert Vallerand, director general of Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, sent a letter out to parents with several links to websites offering advice.

Lila Amirali, clinical director of the department of child psychiatry at Montreal Children's Hospital, said she would not introduce the subject of the massacre to younger children. But, she said, if a child has been exposed to news of the mass killing and "it's hard to avoid right now," she said: "I would offer them as much reassurance as possible."

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