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## Girls as Targets: Recent School Shootings

*How should educators and parents talk with youth about the apparent targeting of girls and young women during the Bailey, Colo., and Nickel Mines, Penn., school shootings?*



In this special Q & A, Tamika Payne, executive director of the Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault, talks with Teaching Tolerance about recent school shootings, gender and violence.

Early reports about the school shootings in Bailey, Colo., and Nickel Mines, Penn., indicate that gunmen singled out female students for victimization. What kinds of emotional issues might this raise for female students elsewhere? For males?

The tactic reinforces the message young girls in our society receive, which is that they need to fear men, especially men who are strangers. As for male students, the incidents will likely generate a sense of protectiveness and guilt. It is important that educators and parents validate students' feelings and normalize other feelings they may be having regarding the assaults.

In Bailey, there have been reports that the gunman sexually assaulted female students. How should educators and parents talk with girls and young women about sexual violence? How might conversations about sexual violence differ, or be the same, with boys and young men?

Sexual violence and its prevention should be discussed long before an incident occurs. Unfortunately, the only [media] coverage the issue receives is typically after an incident happens.

Educators and parents should be talking to all children, not just those who identify as female, about sexual violence. We need to address the societal beliefs that create an environment where 1 in 4 women and 1 in 17 men will be sexual assaulted in their lifetimes.

It is also important to educate our youth on actual dangers of sexual violence. While these sexual assaults and shootings have occurred and there are risks from strangers, our greatest risk is from someone we know. And, the reduction of sexual violence will occur only when we change the beliefs and attitudes of a society that sees women as unequal and sexual objects.

In talking to our youth about sexual violence, we must make sure to communicate that it is not the victim's fault. Whatever the person does to get through the situation was her or his method of survival.

Our conversations should also include emphases on respect, health boundaries and the messages that young people receive around sexuality and gender roles.

In both instances, the shooters were men. Males are disproportionately responsible for violent crime in the U.S. How should educators, parents and youth think about – and talk about – maleness, power and violence?

This conversation should be around how we, as a society define, gender roles. We teach our young men to desensitize themselves. We have universal (American) messages like “little boys don't cry,” “toughen up,” “don't be a 'sissy.’” These messages create a society where young men are conditioned to remove themselves from their feelings and see being tied to the feminine as weak.

Early reports indicate that the gunmen were strangers to students. How should educators and parents balance messages about “stranger danger” with the reality that women are more likely to become victims of violence at the hands of those closest to them, e.g., relatives, boyfriends or friends?

Educators and parents should strive for honest communication – acknowledging the atrocities of these incidents, while at the same time helping students understand that over 80% of assaults happen by someone the victim knows.

*Tamika D. Payne has worked in the non-profit sector since high school when she served as a volunteer at an all-volunteer crisis intervention center. Today, she works with rape crisis centers and other anti-violence agencies and community partners to improve the services to survivors and increase prevention efforts.*