



WHEN IT'S NOT JUST A DRILL: AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE RISING NORM OF SCHOOL LOCKDOWNS

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IMAGE SOURCE: THINKSTOCK

Earlier this year, 8-year-old Camila Flores was having a snack break with her classmates at the UCLA Lab School when her teachers calmly told the kids to go back into the classroom — there was a lockdown. Once inside, an announcement could be heard over the loudspeaker, alerting everyone that this particular lockdown was not a drill.

It was June 1, 2016. Classes would be ending soon, as summer inched closer. Moments earlier, it's possible Camila was daydreaming about the upcoming vacation. But now, she sat in complete silence inside a darkened classroom, huddling close to 50 other children, three teachers, and two assistants. For three hours they would remain there, using a bucket as a toilet.

Camila wasn't too afraid, though — by then, her school had already done two lockdown drills that year, so she had a sense of preparedness.

“My daughter likes to know what's coming,” her mother Ana tells Babble. “For her, being prepared is very important.”

But while her daughter remained calm, Ana was a wreck. She had been on a conference call that morning when a coworker sent a message about a shooter on the UCLA campus, where her daughter's school is located.

“I can't even remember what was going through my head other than, *I need to get her*,” Ana says, looking back. She called her husband to tell him she was on her way to the school to get their daughter, but he told her to wait. He had spoken to someone at the front desk of the school who'd told him that no one was allowed onto the campus.

So she waited. And waited.

“I just sat in the office garage in my car,” she says. “It's scary not to know how your kid is doing.”

Hours later, the world would learn the true cause of the lockdown: A 38-year-old former doctoral student named **Mainak Sarkar had stormed the campus and opened fire**, killing 39-year-old William Klug, a respected engineering professor at the university. Then he put the gun to his head and shot himself.

But back in that garage, less than an hour after the lockdown began, Ana still knew very little of what was going on.

As she sat in her car, glued to every social media and news outlet on her phone, an email came through: It was a message from Camila's school, explaining that the kids were OK, but that coming to the campus before getting the green light from police would disrupt their process and distract the teachers from doing what they needed to do for the kids.

Ana could only wait for so long.

Two hours later, she and some 50 other worried parents stood outside the school's main doors anxious to see their children — instead, they were met by armed guards and policemen blocking the entrance. Thirty minutes went by before the parents were greeted by teachers who reassured them that the kids were fine and that it was crucial to help keep them calm. After signing a form with her name and her daughter's name, Ana finally got to hug Camila as she was escorted out of the building.

She was relieved to see that her daughter was her usual, cheerful self.

“The first thing she wanted to tell me was that she was the first person to pee in the bucket,” says Ana. Then the questions came: “What happened? Why was [the shooter] there? Did he have a gun? Did he want to kill everybody? Why did he want to kill everybody?” Ana tried her best to answer Camila's questions without revealing too much.

“I was honest with her, I don't want to put her in a bubble. But I couldn't tell her that [the shooter] killed a professor, just that he had killed himself.” Ana felt she could handle most of her daughter's queries in a way that was appropriate for her age, but one in particular left her stumped.

“She asked me, ‘Why did he have a gun?’ and I just couldn't answer her.”



IMAGE SOURCE: ANA FLORES

That night was the first time Camila ever asked her parents to keep her door open when she went to bed; a request that would last four straight nights. When Ana asked how she was feeling in the days afterward, her

daughter expressed relief that the shooter was dead and also admitted something that made Ana herself feel better: “Mom, I knew I was OK,” said Camila, “because I know my teachers would die before they let us die.”

“Schools are actually the safest place a child can be,” says Dr. Scott Poland, an international expert on school psychology and psychological issues related to school violence. Poland has worked in the American school system for 20 years and his wife recently retired as a principal. “Your chances of being a homicide victim at school in America are about 1 in 4.5 million,” he tells Babble, citing an **FBI study on active shooter incidents** published in 2014. Despite these odds, however, he supports regular lockdown drills. “Drills give kids a little bit of mastery over what’s happening,” he says. And when kids feel prepared, they’re less prone to trauma.

Especially when you consider these very sobering stats: According to the *Los Angeles Times*, **a gun has been fired on school grounds nearly once a week** since the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012. And since **Everytown for Gun Safety began tracking gunfire on school campuses** in 2013, there have been over 160 separate incidents, leading to 59 deaths and 124 non-fatal injuries.

Most recently, the country saw these terrifying events play themselves out all over again, when a **14-year-old entered a Townville, South Carolina school** on September 28 and opened fire. He injured one student, one teacher, and took the life of another: **Six-year-old Jacob Hall, who died several days later**.

In other words, preparing our kids for active shooter scenarios has become a disturbing, yet unfortunate necessity. One that we can’t ignore.

Writer and mother Yolanda Machado, who has been through two real-life lockdowns with her now 8-year-old daughter, Sofia, says she’s happy that her daughter’s school does at least one lockdown drill per year. “I think they

make her less afraid,” she tells Babble, explaining how they’ve helped prepare Sofia for the real deal. “She has questions afterward, but doesn’t seem as fearful.”

Letisha Marrero, whose 11-year-old daughter, Lola, has also gone through two real lockdowns, admits that both the drills and real-life incidents are usually more traumatic for parents: “It makes me mad that it has to be done, but I’d rather know that the schools are prepared,” she says. “In a way it’s better for the kids to think of it as routine so they don’t panic. I think kids are more resilient than adults in that sense.” Though a part of her is relieved that Lola is very “matter-of-fact” about her lockdown experiences, Letisha resents that they have become “the new normal.”

Yolanda shares the same sentiment. “It made me sad when I first learned that the schools have [lockdown] drills, that this is what [my daughter’s] growing up with,” she says.

The thing that most surprised all of the parents Babble spoke to is the fact that the lockdowns their kids have experienced have all happened in renown school districts.

“I thought I was leaving the insecurity and safety issues behind when I left BedStuy [Brooklyn, NY],” says Letisha, “but it wasn’t the case because it’s a different world that we live in.”

The truth is, explains Dr. Poland, safety drills have been a longstanding practice at school systems across the country, including the infamous “duck and cover” drills that occurred during the Cold War. Though lockdown drills in particular didn’t start to become mainstream until after the 1999 Columbine High School attacks, he says in theory they’re really no different from natural disaster emergency drills that some families even practice at home. The caveat is executing drills in an age-appropriate way, especially when it comes to lockdowns. Dr. Poland discourages the practice that some

schools have implemented doing dramatic, unpredictable active shooter drills that involve antics like hypothetical gunmen and smoke-filled halls.

“The key word is ‘reasonable,’” says Kenneth Trump, President of **National School Safety and Security Services**, “and the challenge for administrators is striking a balance between diversifying drills enough to keep people thinking without going over-the-top where more harm is done than is good.” He says that effective lockdown drills factor in age, development- and special-needs student considerations.

“Everybody has some kind of a trauma history and when we put people through a realistic drill we need to be really thinking carefully about all of those factors,” says Dr. Poland. In terms of preventing potential trauma, he explains that it all comes down to giving your kids the impression that their school is safe, which can be achieved quite simply.

Lola’s first lockdown experience happened while she was in the first grade, just three months after the Sandy Hook school shooting, and lasted for two hours. She was in the cafeteria when a police officer had been shot in the head outside of the school. In order to keep the children’s attention away from the windows, her teachers created a game: whoever was able to keep their eyes — and bodies — away from the windows would get a reward. When her mother was finally able to reunite with her, Lola just wanted to share some good news: “She was happy she got a prize for not going near the window,” she says.





IMAGE SOURCE: LETISHA MARRERO

Despite her dismay that her daughter has experienced two lockdowns in two different school districts, Letisha makes sure not to let her own fears rub off on Lola. “She feels safe in that people in school will do everything to protect her,” she says. “It’s more of an internal struggle for me, [but] my job as a mom is to be a source of strength for her.”

This is exactly what Dr. Poland recommends parents do: “If they’re doing OK with this, then your job is not to make them as worried as you are,” he says. “Children look to the nearest adult to see ‘how upset should I be about this?’ The message that they’re safe will go a long way.”

He says the first thing parents should do after their child comes out of a real-life lockdown is reassure them that their school is safe and that the principals and teachers did a good job protecting them. It's natural that kids will have questions after an event like a lockdown and may even exhibit some signs of stress similar to what Ana experienced with Camila, who wanted to keep the bedroom door open for a few nights. "Parents need to respond with patience, tolerance and love. [Your child] might need to sleep with you for awhile and that's all right—they need the physical comfort and closeness." He recommends that parents tell their children the truth about what happened in language that's appropriate for their age. Answer their questions, but don't go overboard.

"What's hard is explaining the kind of world we live in," says Yolanda. "[My daughter] wants clear answers, but I can't give her those exact answers — I don't know what makes people kill people." After each lockdown incident, Yolanda tried to talk to her daughter "on her level" and explain that there are always people to protect us, no matter the danger.

In addition to frequent and open dialogue with children, Dr. Poland also recommends that schools over-communicate with parents about their lockdown procedures and drills. Yolanda, in particular, wishes her daughter's school revealed more details about their lockdown drills. "It would give me peace of mind," she says. "I think I'm more paranoid than [my daughter]." Her biggest frustration was a lack of communication during the actual lockdowns, each of which happened in a different school. She recalls being glued to social media to find updates and trying not to panic.

Though Ana was satisfied with the communication her daughter's school provided during and after the lockdown — including a letter from the principal and school psychologist — improvements have definitely been made in the weeks after. The biggest changes include the creation of a formal alert system specifically for the parents of the Lab School and parental inclusion on the emergency text alert system for UCLA students.

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“For the most part, the majority of adults are quite understanding of why we do lockdown procedures at school,” says Dr. Poland, “but they can get a little upset when they want access to their child and they’re denied. When all the info is distributed to parents explaining why these procedures take place, you’ll have fewer [parents] banging on the school doors insisting to get their kid.”

This is something Letisha has learned to make peace with. “Your first instinct is to run and grab them,” says Letisha, “[But] you have to trust the people who have been entrusted with taking care of your child.”

For what it’s worth, Yolanda has seen a promising outcome from her daughter’s experiences. Sofia knows that both of the lockdowns she went through were due to shooters in the area and she constantly questions why people want guns. The soon-to-be fourth grader is now very interested in politics, including gun control issues.

“I was playing with Barbies at her age,” she says, “[but] she’s so aware of everything going on in the world. I want her to want to change things.”

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