Scary Clown Phenomenon Discussions With Children
For School Staff and Parents

There have always been people who have wanted to scare people, and there have always been people have wanted to hurt others. Often these kinds of phenomenon have a somewhat limited life cycle. A year from now this may have subsided. We can all hope that this will be a passing fad and that it will die down. While there are some somewhat reassuring thoughts we can share with children, there are some cautions that we need to be aware of as adults. Both follow. Content for thought is in straight font. *Questions to ask youth are italicized.*

To share with youth:

When having discussion with youth about this kind of issue we really don't want to increase their fears! For that reason, it is often helpful to start by just stating the obvious and then asking open-ended questions so they can give you a clear sense of what they know and how great their fears are. Some of these openers can give you a sense of where to start:

- *I heard that some kids at schools were talking about clowns. Are kids at[our] [your] school talking about clowns?* (If there is a nod or "yes") *What have you heard?*
- *I heard on the news about the scary clown thing that's happening. What do you know about that?*
- (If you're a parent) *You came home from school this week talking about scary clowns, and I'd really like to talk more about that. What have you thought about since we talked?*
- If you're a teacher or counselor, remind kids of anything the school has already done about this or discussions you've already had, and then, *"I wanted to check in with you all again to find out what thoughts or conversations you've had since then."*

When they begin to voice their fears, all too often, adults rush in to tell children all the reasons they don't need to worry. When we do that, we stop their contribution to the conversations before we know all they might want to tell us. Be <u>way</u> more patient than you might usually be, and instead of focusing quite yet on solutions or problem-solving, get more information.

- *Really! Tell me more about that.*
- *And what do you think about what [those kids at school] [your classmates] said?*
- *What do you think about that now?*

You notice that we're not asking them yet about their emotions. Try to get all of their thoughts before you take them there. When they really have no more to tell you about what they've heard and what they think, move into the emotions.

- *Are some of your friends or siblings frightened?*
- *And what about you. What is the scariest part about this for you?*
- *What do you think the scariest part is for your classmates/friends?*

You notice, this isn't a yes/no question. Not "are you frightened" but asking <u>what the most frightening aspect is</u> for the child. If we've laid the foundation for the bigger picture (asking the first two sets of bulleted questions), it is easy for youth to let us know that we got it wrong – that they're not frightened ("I'm not scared, but Joey is."). But often if we ask, "<u>Are</u> you frightened?" kids may say "no" because they think we hope they aren't frightened.

Now check in about what's been helpful so far, and what else would be helpful.
- *What are the times that worry students most?* (When we ask about "students" rather than "you," it gives youth the opportunity to state their emotions as though they're speaking on behalf of other children, which makes it safer to say in front of others. It is like we are making them the expert and as though they're helping you understand everyone's reactions! They are likely giving you their own reactions and fears.)
- *Are there things that the school already has in place that are helpful?*
- *What else could anyone do that would help?*

Walking to and from school are apt to be high anxiety times. Schools and parents need to work together on this. Although the likelihood of an event occurring to students is extremely low, the anxiety is real. Indulge students by having a few parents walk kids to school so others can join. Ask adults in neighborhoods to be out in front of their houses waving and talking to kids as they pass so safe adults are in eyesight. Work on a range of ideas like this. Parent organizations could rally support for this. It is critical to remember that our demeanor needs to be one of empathy for their fears, but not sharing our fears or a frightened attitude with them.

After going through all of the above to a greater or lesser degree, <u>then</u> look for some honest reassurances for youth.
- *These events are very unusual, but they get a lot more attention from the media and on social media than their frequency deserves. An event way across the country makes the evening news and it seems like a threat to everyone, as though it is happening often everywhere!* Then use some analogy that is age appropriate to help youth understand that the frequency of these events is much much lower than it seems because people are giving it a lot of attention.   (In a gallon jar of sand, one grain is the child who was scared by a clown; the others are kids who just heard about it and are scared.)
- *If someone wants to really hurt others, they're perhaps less apt to wear a costume that would be easy to spot. But if they want to <u>scare</u> someone, especially because of the hype, the costume does that.*
- Now revisit what they said would help.
    o   Tell them what you'll try to put in place (more adults at the bus stop, etc.)
    o   Help them strategize for what they can do when they're anxious.
- Remind them that you want to keep this conversation open.
    o   *If you have new ideas of things that would help, let me know!*
    o   *Don't wait for me to ask how you're doing about this.*
    o   *When would you like us to check in about this?*

This is a starting place. If this phenomenon continues, additional guidelines will be forthcoming. If there are concepts with this that aren't covered, please let us know.

MAJOR CAUTION & RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR SCHOOLS WHERE STUDENTS HAVE BEEN ENGAGED IN "CLOWNING"

The major caution is that, although most of these incidents may have only the goal of scaring or even terrorizing people, an unsettling aspect is that we know that those who do some kinds of violent acts against others often have behavioral patterns that include acquiring the means (weapons, or in this case the costume), casing out the site and practicing the attack. Psychologically, acquiring a clown suit in order to only do the terror without intending to actually harm is **still taking these people closer to actually doing harm.** The adrenaline rush of the chase provides a burst of adrenaline, which makes people more easily provoked and likely lessens their boundaries around harming others. Just like using a drug, in order to have that same adrenaline rush, the level of acting out has to increase. The repeated "practice" of clowning inches them closer to the next level of acting out or of increasing violence.

In order to do this, people/youth have to silo their empathy and compassion and distance themselves from seeing the victims as human. Youth who are into violent video games often want increasing violence in the games over time. Although some professionals who do student threat assessments differentiate risk by whether a youth uses violent video games for entertainment or for practice toward actually doing violence, that approach fails to acknowledge the damage it does to the individual's psyche as well as to our collective culture to have great numbers of our youth practicing the dehumanization of victims.

For these and other reasons, it is particularly important that schools that identify youth who are involved in scary clown behaviors treat those actions very differently than routine discipline problems. All of these incidents need to be a part of the Student Threat Assessment process. Many districts are far behind in forming multidisciplinary teams that include law enforcement, mental health specialists from outside of the district, juvenile services staff, juvenile court, etc. For many districts, decisions and resulting student plans following threat assessment rest primarily with school personnel. Evaluating youth who have engaged in scary clown behavior is more than should be resting solely on the shoulders of the school administration and counselors. Although identified students may try to shrug off their clowning behavior as having used poor judgment in deciding to do this "prank," that in itself illustrates a lack of empathy for victims. These cases merit a multi-disciplinary team response.

For schools, if you realize that your district needs to refine or enhance its student threat assessment process, please be in touch with us at CMI. We are in touch with the best national leaders in the field. It is too late to put a team together when you're in the midst of a threat. This is something to address now! It takes time to refine the process and put things in place.

For parents, if your child has been engaged in this activity, don't make decisions about how serious your child is or was about either scaring or actually harming others. This is often more than just poor judgment. At the very least, it can be the first step down a slippery slope of mistreatment of others. This is likely about some missing pieces relative to basic respect and empathy, and this is the time to work with your school counselor or other mental health professional. Don't cover for your child; nip this in the bud, before there is greater trouble.