

Opinion: Rehearsing for death

By Launa Hall, Washington Post

“Remember that activity when we all get in the closet and pretend we’re not even there, so our principal can’t find us?” I choose my words carefully as I prep my pre-kindergarten students for the lockdown drill scheduled for that afternoon. These drills have become routine at Arlington elementary schools, and at schools across the country. After the latest school shooting, on Oct. 24 in Washington state, schools will no doubt be running through drills yet again. What can we do about all these shootings?, teachers ask each other. Lock the doors, we’re told, and assume the worst is coming.

When you’re guiding 4- and 5-year-olds through a drill, your choice of words can mean everything. “Activity,” not “game,” because we laugh during games, and I can’t risk introducing laughter. I don’t say “police,” because some little kids find police officers scary, and I can’t risk introducing tears. Instead, even though our principal isn’t there this day, I want them to picture his kind but purposeful face when they hear the police officers and administrators hustling down the hallway, testing the doorknob of each room. I don’t say “quiet,” because I can’t risk them shushing one another while they are crammed together, practically sitting in each other’s laps. And because it’s not quiet that’s required for this drill, but rather complete silence. As silent as children who aren’t there at all.

After lunch we hear a fiddling with the loudspeaker. Our well-meaning assistant principal is nearing retirement, and certain technologies, such as the many buttons on the intercom, are a strain on her. There is a low mumbling, which may be coaching from the office staff. More fumbling – perhaps a drop. Then, flustered, at last, the assistant principal says, “Lockdown, everyone, thank you.”

My eyes meet my assistant's over the heads of our students. Usually, we get the announcement: "We are in a lockdown. This is a drill." The assistant principal didn't say the word "drill." But of course it has to be. We were told about it in an all-staff e-mail hours ago. This is totally routine, I tell myself. I'm annoyed that I took even a split second to consider an alternative.

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