How prepared can we be if evil strikes again?

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When gunfire erupted at an Oregon shopping mall last week, Shaun Wik knew instantly what to do: Run for the door. And so, when Wik heard a man he believed to be the gunman shout "Get down on the ground!", the 20-year-old fled instead. And he lived.

In Arizona, on a January day two years ago, Mary Reed reacted the way her reflexes told her to when Jared Loughner opened fire on a meet-your-congresswoman gathering at her local Safeway. Reed shielded her then-17-year-old daughter, taking a bullet in the back.

They were two responses that came from very different places. For Reed, 54, it was purely instinctive. "I didn't think about anything," she said. "Mine was just that mammalian part of your mind that protects your child."

Wik's actions, though, weren't merely a fight-or-flight response. As a sophomore in high school, he had learned about the Columbine massacre and was taught to always have an escape route. When it mattered, he did.

Even as we struggle to figure out what happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School _ who did what and why _ the sad frequency of attacks by men with guns is creating a growing school of thought based on a simple premise: Be ready for the bullets. These mass shootings, but also bombings and terror attacks, have fueled a need, rational or not, to be prepared for the worst in whatever form it may come and know how to act when it does.

The city of Houston, one of the nation's largest, has even produced a video advising residents of what to do should they encounter an "active shooter." It is called "Run. Hide. Fight." and was released in the days after a gunman opened fire in July at a midnight "Batman" movie screening in Aurora, Colo., killing 12 people.

After a spate of school shootings that included the 1999 Columbine massacre in Colorado and the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, schools heightened security, developed new guidelines for spotting potentially threatening individuals and implemented so-called "lockdown drills" to better help students know what to do in the event of an emergency.
And with Sandy Hook, it seems to have marched forward: Have we gone so far down this rabbit hole of mass murder in America that we must make sure our first-graders are ready with escape routes, too?

The response inside the school, authorities said, seemed to be a mix of the two notions of preparation and instinct — as teachers, a school psychologist, a principal risked, and in some cases lost, their lives to protect the children in their care.

Lockdown drills were part of the routine for the nearly 450 kindergartners through fourth-graders who attended Sandy Hook. Earlier this year, principal Dawn Hochsprung tweeted a picture of an evacuation exercise, showing little ones bundled in winter coats standing outside the school, quietly in line behind their teachers. Hochsprung died Friday at the gunman's hand.

And while nothing can ever prepare children for what happened at Sandy Hook, having a specific procedure to follow probably did help keep the youngsters calm and focused — and could potentially minimize the effects of the trauma down the road, said Stephen Brock, a professor of school psychology at California State University, Sacramento.

He recalled in recent days hearing a little girl in Connecticut on the radio "talking about how the teacher told them to go to the corner of the room away from the doors and windows so the animal couldn't get in."

"In her mind, it was probably a ... lion or a tiger," Brock said. Nevertheless, "they followed procedures that they had been drilled in before. By responding appropriately, it can make the situation appear less threatening if there's something that they can do to keep themselves safe."

Not unlike adult survivors of these awful tragedies, children also have their own innate tendencies that help influence their response. Even if they can't make their own decisions to hide or escape — they know instinctively who can: the adults around them, to whom they look for cues about how to behave.

Think of a child at a park who falls off the swing set, Brock said. If they look over at Mom and she's upset, chances are the child will get upset, too. If not, "They'd wipe ... off their knee and go out and play some more," he said. "Young kids are going to have their threat perception significantly dictated by how the adults around them are behaving."

Without their moms or dads to look to, the schoolchildren at Sandy Hook turned to their teachers for those cues. And those teachers, in turn, became their saviors and heroes.

In the school library, clerk Mary Ann Jacob was working with a group of 18 fourth-graders when she heard a commotion over the school intercom. She called down to the main office and was told, "There's a shooting. Then she yelled "lock down" to her students before running across the hall to another classroom to tell them to lock down, as well.
"The kids know the routine, and the teachers know the routine, and everyone has a spot in their room where they're supposed to go to," she told reporters on the scene.

Eventually Jacob and three other adults ushered the children into a storage room and locked the door. They found crayons and paper, which they divvied up among the kids.

"They were asking, `What's going on?' We said, `We don't know. Our job is to stay quiet. It may be a drill. It may not. But we're just going to stay here.'"

Jacob, of course, knew that it was no drill.

As soon as she heard the shots, first-grade teacher Kaitlin Roig rushed her 15 students into a tiny bathroom, using a bookshelf to barricade the door. She told her children to be "absolutely quiet."

"I said, `There are bad guys out there now. We need to wait for the good guys,'" Roig said in an interview with ABC News. "If they started crying, I would take their faces and say, `It's going to be OK. Show me your smile.'"

Just 29 years old herself, Roig drew on her training but, more so, basic humanity to give the children what she thought they needed to make it through.

"I'm thinking that I have to almost be their parent," she said. So she did what any parent would do. She told them how much she loved them. And she promised that everything would be OK.

"I wanted that to be one of the last things they heard," Roig said, "not the gunfire in the hallway."

University of Virginia forensic clinical psychologist Dewey Cornell expects the shooting at Sandy Hook to reinforce the need for door locks and other security measures at schools, or even prompt additional procedures. But Cornell, a leader in developing assessment guidelines to identify threatening individuals that are now used in schools across the nation, worries about going too far.

"This case is going to distort people's perception of the safety of our schools, and that's really unfortunate," he said. "Elementary schools are extremely safe environments."

Aiden Licata's parents prepped him well before the attack last week at his school. If he ever encountered danger along the lines of a Columbine or an Aurora, they told him, do one thing: Run.

The 6-year-old did just that, having the presence of mind to grab his classmates and flee even after the shooter burst into his classroom and gunned down his teacher.

"He was very brave," Robert Licata said of his son. "He waited for his friends."
It's easy to imagine that similar conversations are happening all across the nation now, after Sandy Hook.

That, too, is just part of society today, said James Garbarino, a professor of humanistic psychology at Loyola University in Chicago who specializes in violence and trauma involving children.

Children have seen enough of these horrors on television news or the Internet or in fictionalized movies to know that something bad could happen to them, too _ and to wonder how they should respond just in case. Parents, Garbarino said, should have the conversation as long as they can ensure their children are aware and informed without frightening them unnecessarily about a situation that they are, still, unlikely to ever face.

"What do you say? You say, `It's really sad. This terrible thing happened. This young man went crazy, and he had guns. But I know your school is safe because the teachers are on the lookout.'"

In short, he said: "Do all that you can to foster their sense of security."

Brock said that doing drills with younger children, a common thing post-Columbine, has produced two important conclusions.

First, kids faced with the mock version of a stressful event respond appropriately. And second, developing that appropriate response can make them feel they have the power to keep themselves safe _ and thus make the situation appear less threatening.

"I was kind of worried for a while there that by doing these new things called lockdown drills, we might be unnecessarily frightening kids and preparing them for an event that has a real low probability of occurring," Brock said. "Was the cost worth the benefit, especially since it's going to be so rare that we're going to have to employ these drills?"

"The answer," he said, "appears to be yes."