

Michigan Mother Found Guilty of Manslaughter in Her Son's School Shooting: Should Schools Lean-In to Hold Parents More Accountable for their Children's Behavior?

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Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

On November 30, 2021, fifteen-year-old Ethan Crumbley brought a 9mm semi-automatic handgun into his school, using it to murder four students and injure seven others—including a teacher. Charged as an adult with 24 crimes, including murder and terrorism, he pleaded guilty to all charges and was sentenced two years later to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

On December 3, 2021, James and Jennifer Crumbley—Ethan's parents—were charged with involuntary manslaughter for failing to secure the handgun used by their son. In fact, James had purchased the gun for Ethan four days before the shooting, and Jennifer was captured on security video leaving a shooting range the next day with Ethan and the handgun.

According to testimony during Jennifer's case, the two had been taking target practice in what she described on social media as a "mom and son day testing out his new Christmas present." Ethan referred to his gun online as "My new beauty."

Critically, both parents knew that Ethan had mental health issues. Indeed, in the days before the shooting, school officials met with Crumbley's parents to share a picture he had drawn of a gun, a bullet, and a person who had been shot twice and was bleeding.

On the day of the shooting, Ethan was taken out of class and was interviewed by school personnel. And yet, despite the mental health concerns and the picture, both school personnel and his parents allowed Ethan to return to class that day— rather than sending him home. The shooting followed around 1 PM.

Just this week, on February 6, 2024, Jennifer Crumbley was found guilty of four counts of involuntary manslaughter, and she now faces up to 60 years in prison. According to [CNN](#),

With this verdict, Jennifer Crumbley became the first US parent of a school shooter to be held accountable for the slayings. Citing the prosecution, Crumbley was "grossly negligent" in handing out a gun to her son, Ethan.

Meanwhile, she never did anything to give her son proper treatment for his mental health problems. The prosecutors presented testimonies from law enforcement officials, shooting victims, school employees, and people who had known Crumbley.

"Even though she didn't pull the trigger on Nov. 30 [2021], she's responsible for those deaths," said Oakland County (MI) assistant prosecutor Marc Keast. The parents "didn't do a number of tragically small and easy things that would have prevented this from happening."

Jame Crumbley's trial is scheduled in March. The parents' trials were separated at their request.

When Schools Counsel Parents to Get their Children Counseling

As a longtime school psychologist, I can remember countless parent conferences where we implored parents to get their children social, emotional, behavioral, or mental health help from community-based professionals. While we were providing services at the school, their children's challenges were so evident across multiple settings, or so intense or unusual that our school-based mental health resources were not enough.

Typically, these parent conferences focused on issues related to their children's suicidal ideation, trauma, stress, anxiety, depression, fear, eating or sleep disorders, and more. But they also included issues related to anger, violence, hyperactivity, sexual misconduct, anti-social interactions, oppositional defiance, and cutting or self-mutilation.

These conferences also often addressed (a) students' sleep, diet, weight, exercise, and hygiene; (b) their organizational skills, motivation, homework completion, and school attendance; and (c) their social and emotional welfare, and quality and effectiveness of parent supervision.

Significantly, during these conferences, we could only recommend outside services to our parents. . . we could not require them to act.

In extreme cases, we might send the involved parents a certified letter documenting our concerns and recommendations. Or, we might report them to the local social service or child protective agency. These approaches, quite honestly, rarely changed the parents' behavior, and they often further weakened our relationships with them.

In other cases, some districts forbid their teachers, related service professionals, or administrators to even recommend outside services. . . because they fear that they then become responsible to pay for them.

None of this serves our students in critical need well. They often do not get the needed community-based services and, as above, a school's good faith efforts are sometimes unwelcome or interpreted as intrusive.

With the Jennifer Crumbley decision this week, however, we wonder:

- Will this decision move the pendulum toward greater parental accountability when schools recommend outside supports to address their children's significant health, mental health, and wellness needs;
- Will the threat of litigation motivate these parents to take timely and effective action—consistent with the recommendations; and
- Will schools become more assertive in their interactions with parents, especially when there is a documented threat of student, staff, and school violence?

Only time will tell, but certainly schools and parents need to “sit up” and take notice.

What “Motivates” Parents to Follow School Recommendations?

When I was a “little” school psychologist-in-training at Syracuse University, I spent two years as a practicum student with Dr. Tony Conti, a master school psychologist in the Westhill School District. Tony was kind, patient, wise, creative, an expert in so many areas, and my most-influential mentor.

While he tragically died when he was 42, Tony also greatly influenced the field of school psychology. . . helping us especially to understand why parents follow (or don't follow) our recommendations for outside services and support.

Tony's 1975 article, “Variables Related To Contacting/Not Contacting Counseling Services Recommended By School Psychologists,” was a first of its kind. It reported on the variables that most-predicted parents' acceptance and follow-through on our school-based recommendations for counseling services for their children.

Expanding on and updating Tony's research for schools and districts in 2024, we now have a science-to-practice blueprint on how to best frame our parental recommendations so that they actually engage the community-based services needed—for a wide range of challenges—by their children.

Reflecting on our earlier discussion: Would this blueprint have changed James and Jennifer Crumbley's decisions (a) to not buy their son a gun; (b) to, at least, secure the gun so that it was completely inaccessible to their son; and/or (c) to get their son the mental health support that it appears he needed?

We don't know for sure.

But any of these three decisions might have saved four students' lives, seven students' and teachers' injuries, hundreds of students' and families' traumas, one now-seventeen year old adolescent's lifetime in prison, and one (maybe, two) manslaughter incarcerations against two parents.

And so. . . based on a search of past and current research, the factors that most influence parents to follow school personnel's recommendations for community-based services include:

- **Perceived Need:** People are more likely to seek community-based services when they see their child's need for emotional support, guidance, or problem-solving. When they recognize their child's distress or struggles, they are more inclined to reach out for professional help.

- **Stigma and Social Norms**: Societal, community, friends, and family members' attitudes associated with mental health services can impact parents' decisions. Fear of judgment or negative perceptions may discourage some from seeking community-based, while others may prioritize their well-being regardless of societal norms.
- **Awareness and Knowledge**: Awareness about community-based services and their benefits is crucial. Parents who are informed about available resources are more likely to seek help. Lack of awareness or misconceptions can hinder access to community-based.
- **Cultural Factors**: Cultural beliefs, values, and practices influence help-seeking behavior. Some cultures may encourage seeking support from family or religious leaders—rather than community-based professionals. Competence and sensitivity are essential for effective discussions with parents from different racial, cultural, socio-economic, and other diverse backgrounds.
- **Personal Coping Strategies**: People with strong coping skills may rely on self-help methods or informal support networks. Conversely, those who struggle to cope independently may be more motivated to seek professional assistance.
- **Severity of Symptoms**: The severity of a child's emotional distress, behavioral gaps, academic failures, or mental health symptoms plays a significant role in parents' decision to act. Parents with children experiencing intense distress or persistent symptoms are more likely to seek professional help.
- **Previous Experiences**: Positive or negative experiences with community-based or mental health services can shape parents' future decisions. A successful past community-based experience may encourage someone to seek help again, while negative encounters may deter them.
- **Social Support**: The availability of supportive friends, family, or peers can influence parents' help-seeking behavior (positively or negatively). While perhaps counter-intuitive, strong social networks may provide emotional support, reducing the urgency to seek professional community-based.
- **Financial and Practical Constraints**: Practical considerations—such as cost, insurance coverage, transportation, and time availability—impact parents' decisions to engage with community-based services. Limited resources or logistical challenges sometimes override parents' understanding and commitment to their child's needs.
- **Trust in the Therapeutic Relationship**: Initial trust and rapport with a community-based professional significantly affect long-term parental engagement and commitment. A positive therapeutic alliance encourages continued contact, while a lack of trust may lead to discontinuation.

Clearly, in order to strategically select the “right” factors above and the best way to communicate them, school personnel must have the positive relationships, the experiential knowledge, and a history of collaborative interactions with parents who have significantly struggling or challenging children. As each situation is unique, there is no “tried and true” sequence or approach. . . each interaction must be individualized to each parent and child.

But beyond the blueprint, parents respond best when school personnel are empathetic, constructive, and future-focused. School personnel need to be seen as allies, and they need to be actively involved in removing barriers. For example, school personnel may need to vet and identify the best outside community resources for a specific student. They may need to provide transportation. They may need to investigate funding and payment options. And they definitely need to check-in with parents on a regular basis.

While these activities may require more time than for the “typical” student case, this time may facilitate a student’s long-term success, and save other students (and staff) from catastrophic events that involve trauma, physical injuries, and death.

Summary

While framed in tragedy, the Jennifer Crumbley court decision this week should be (a) a wake-up call for parents who know that they and their child are struggling with academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and/or mental health problems; and (b) permission for schools to strategically recommend community-based services when they are warranted, and to hold parents more accountable for following these recommendations in a timely and responsible way.

While school personnel, as in the section immediately above, need to forge strong relationships with the parents in these situations, they also need to understand where these parents are coming from so that their communications and recommendations can be heard, accepted, and followed.

There is no “one way” to do this. . . but the “wrong way” typically results in parental defensiveness, withdrawal, anger, and their rejection of the recommendations being made.

For now, school personnel need to discuss the implications of the Ethan, Jennifer, and James Crumbley cases. . . and what occurred at Oxford High School in Oxford Township, Michigan in 2021. . . for everyone involved. They need to discuss the implications with their parent leaders. . . and the factors that most-influence parents to get the community-based services that their children need.

The Crumbleys should represent a cautionary tale.

Schools need to learn from this tale, acting assertively and with determination. . . and not with fear or caution.

While schools cannot provide all the services needed by our children. . . they can serve our most involved and at-risk students by convincing their parents to take the actions needed to address their significant needs.

My Friends: A lot of my school and district consultation work is funded by (often, five-year) federal grants from the U.S. Department of Education that I write for and with the districts who are interested in implementing my work.

A new \$4 million grant program is coming up in a few months that needs a single moderate to large school district with at least 25 elementary schools.

As we can submit multiple grants from different districts, if you are interested in discussing this grant and a partnership with me, call (813-495-3318) or drop me an e-mail as soon as possible (howieknoff1@projectachieve.info (<mailto:howieknoff1@projectachieve.info>)).

Another five-year \$4 million grant program will likely be announced a year from now. This program will be open to districts of all sizes. If you are interested, once again, it is not too early to talk.

BOTH grant programs focus on (a) school safety, climate, and discipline; (b) classroom relationships, behavior management, and engagement; and (c) teaching students interpersonal, conflict prevention and resolution, social problem-solving, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills and interactions.

Beyond these grants, if you are interested in my work for your educational setting, I am happy to provide a free consultation with you and your team to discuss needs, current status, goals, and possible approaches.

Again, call me or drop me an e-mail. Let's get to know one another.

Best,

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