Bang Bang You're Dead
A conversational guide for parents

Preface:

Bang Bang You're Dead (BBYD) is a Showtime Original Movie that deals powerfully with the issue of school violence. Showtime is a premium movie channel that is broadcast over satellite and cable channels. It is available in the metro-Denver area. It will premiere on October 13 and will be rebroadcast regularly for at least six months. Depending on ratings and other economic factors, it may run longer on Showtime and its related networks.

This movie is **not** endorsed by the Jefferson County Education (JCEA) Association, the Colorado Education Association (CEA), or the National Education Association (NEA). However, the Association at all levels has worked successfully with Showtime in an attempt to mitigate the possible negative impact the movie, and it's graphic content, may have on our own traumatized community, as well as others across the nation. Also, please note that neither the Jeffco PTA nor Jeffco Public Schools has endorsed this film.

JCEA has facilitated a number of preview screenings to a cross section of adult audiences in Jefferson County, Colorado. The reaction to the movie has been from "This is irresponsible exploitation; how can we keep this off the air?' to "Every teacher and student in America ought to see this film." Such varied reactions are to be expected.

BBYD is not a dramatic reenactment or documentary about the tragedy on April 20, 1999, nor is it intended to be. It is a movie based on the writing of playwright William Mastrosimone, who wrote a widely performed, one-act play of the same name. The movie parallels the themes of his play and is intended to be provocative. It achieves that purpose.

To promote positive discussion and reflection, Showtime worked with KIDSNET to produce a community-based discussion guide. You can access that guide at www.kidsnet.org and at www.sho.con/bbyd/. This guide includes the following advisory:

> "The content of this film may disturb some viewers. Please have professionals available to support viewing of this program. There may be more than one way to offer guided viewing for students who need extra support. **Previewing by parents and teachers is strongly recommended.**"

Our concern with the content of the movie is primarily two fold.

1. BBYD contains many visual and sound cues that may trigger strong, and unexpected emotional responses from people who are struggling to live with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). That includes many in our community and, as a result of 9/11, many across the nation. Unfortunately, many people who experience PTSD may not be aware of the reasons for their emotional responses. Some symptoms include:
    a. Flashbacks and nightmares
    b. Trouble eating or sleeping
    c. Startled reactions
    d. Crying
    e. Difficulty concentrating or remembering
    f. Difficulty making decisions
    g. Headaches or stomachaches with no physical cause
    h. Withdrawal or isolation
    i. Feeling empty or emotionally numb; feelings of shock, anger, helplessness

j. Suicidal feelings or threats

While these sorts of reactions are normal responses, anyone who is concerned is urged to reach out and talk to someone he/she trusts. Talking to a friend, your parents, a school counselor, teacher, doctor, or minister. You may also call the 24-hour emergency line at the Jefferson Center for Mental Health: (303) 425-0300. Find out more about PTSD by visiting: http://www.jeffersonmentalhealth.org/stress.html

2. BBYD contains an especially graphic youth suicide scene that has alarmed our mental health community. Youth suicide is the second or third leading cause of death among America's youth, and our community is not immune. One of our high schools is currently experiencing what is called cluster suicides. Many of their students, as well as those in other schools are considered at risk of suicide. Some warning signs for suicide are:
   a. Suicide threats.
   b. Previous suicide attempts.
   c. Statements revealing a desire to die.
   d. Sudden changes in behavior such as withdrawal, apathy, moodiness, anger.
   e. Depression, which may manifest itself in crying, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and statements about hopelessness and worthlessness.
   f. A preoccupation with and asking questions about death.
   g. Trouble concentrating and making decisions.
   h. Loss of interest in appearance.
   i. Taking unnecessary risks.
   j. Acquiring a weapon.
   k. Failing to take prescribed medication or following required diets.
   l. Making final arrangement, such as giving away personal possessions.
   m. Sudden appearance of happiness and calmness after a period of some of the characteristics listed above.

   Parents should also be aware that the risk of youth suicide increases if a close friend or family member has died as a result of suicide or tragic accident.

   If you observe these signs, contact a mental health professional for a consultation as soon as possible. **Please note: talking with your child about suicide or any other self-destructive behaviors does not encourage or promote such behaviors.**

The JCEA believes that mentally healthy youth will deal appropriately with this movie. We also believe that through constructive dialogues, teachers and parents can help students gain a deeper understanding of the more positive themes of BBYD.

Unfortunately, not all children in our community are mentally healthy, and mental health is a hard thing for parents to assess, especially during often-volatile teen years. Nevertheless, we encourage parents to have a conversation with their children regarding this movie. The following parent guide is intended to provide parents a **framework** for holding such a conversation.

Parent Conversation Guide

Setting: When and where you have a conversation with your child is very important. Try to find an opportunity that will allow you enough time to have a quality, uninterrupted interaction. Good times might be when your child comes home from school, immediately after dinner, or right before going to bed. You know best when that might be. Pick a quiet time. Also, hold the conversation in a private place, where feelings can be shared without embarrassment.

You might say: “Bobby, I’ve been hearing (or I’ve seen, or have read) about the movie Bang Bang You’re Dead. Have you seen it?” If the answer is “no,” follow up by asking: “Have you heard anything about it?”

Then, tell your child you’d like to have a few minutes to talk with him/her about the movie and ask if this would be a good time to talk. If it’s not a good time, respect that and agree on when a time would be good to have your conversation.

The conversation:

I. *If they have seen the film*, use the following questions as the basis for a meaningful dialogue. But do this carefully. This is not an interrogation. Let them know you would appreciate hearing their “review” of the movie. Listen in a caring, open manner. It may be helpful to begin the conversation by sharing some of your high school experiences that relate to the film. The purpose of your conversation is to build a bridge of trust between you and your child, to demonstrate your care and concern, and to explain that feeling low and depressed are a normal part of life. Equally important is the message that, if a person has self-destructive thoughts and/or actions, he/she needs to get help!

The person your child might seek out for help may not be you. Don’t be surprised or overreact to that. If it’s not you, use this dialogue as an opportunity to build on your own relationship and to identify whom your child might talk to. The important message is that they should talk to some adult who could help.

1. What did you think the movie was about?
2. Is the school in the movie at all like your school?
3. Do you feel safe at school?
4. Was there any part of the movie that bothered you?
5. I was bothered by the fact that some students in the school, the Trogs, felt so isolated and picked on that they turned to violence as an answer. It seems like it just got out of hand. These kids have a right to feel sad and angry. They do not have a right to hurt themselves or others. I’m wondering what other options were open to them, what other choices they could make that would have avoided the violence.
6. If that happened to you or one of your friends, what would you do?
7. Like Trevor in the movie, have you ever felt so low or depressed you didn’t know where to turn?
8. If “no”:
    a. Well, if you ever did feel that way, do you have someone, an adult; you would feel comfortable talking to? Could you talk to me about it?
    b. Do you know someone who has felt like that, really low and depressed?
    c. If “yes”:
        i. What do you suppose is going on in that person’s life that causes him/her to feel that way?
        ii. I’d like to think that you would encourage him/her to talk to someone who could help. Would you feel comfortable doing that?
9. If “yes”:
    a. Do you feel that way now?
    b. It makes me sad that you feel (felt) that way and I was not aware of it.
    c. What’s going on that causes(ed) you to feel that way?
    d. Have you ever thought about hurting yourself? Others?
    e. Can we make a deal that if you ever felt that way you would tell me before you did anything? [This is called a “safety contract, ”if the child says “no” it’s important to help your child identify someone he/she would talk to. See #10 below]
    f. So, when you’ve felt really depressed, what have you done to feel better?
    g. What do you think we can do to make that better?

h. Are there ways I can help with that?

10. Can you tell me three people who you feel comfortable talking to?
    a. If “yes”: That makes me feel much better. I’m glad you have people, especially other trusted adults in your life you feel you can talk to. You know, I am always here for you too!
    b. If “no”: Well let’s think about this. [Suggest options] Is there an adult at school: a teacher, coach, counselor? Someone at our church? A family friend or relative they are especially close to. [Help them find someone they would agree to talk to, if that person is not you!]

II. *If your child has not seen the film*, there are two approaches depending of the mental health of your child.

If you believe your child would not be adversely impacted by the film, simply develop a “safety contract”: Can we agree that if you see this film you will let me know so that you and I can talk about it? Thanks, it’s really important to me!

If you have reason to believe your child is at-risk emotionally, caution them about the content. Use your discretion as to whether or not to forbid them from seeing the movie. For naturally rebellious teens, that may cause them to see the film as a show of independence. You know your child best. It is always best if your child takes the information you give and makes the wise choice.

If, however, after your discussion, the child says he/she still wants to see the movie. Agree on the “safety contract” above.

III. If parents are comfortable with the tone of their conversation, they may want to continue it by exploring the tragic relationship between Trevor and his parents. While his parents clearly loved and cared about him, Trevor did not perceive that and was not able to talk to either of them about his self-destructive thoughts. You might introduce this part of the conversation by saying:

As a parent, one of the parts of the film that really troubled me was the relationship between Trevor and his parents. His parents loved him but he didn’t know that. Do you know that I love you? If there were ever a time when you felt that I did not love you, can we agree that you would talk to me about that?

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