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**Keeping Newtown close to their hearts
Local parents continue to cope with the tragedy**

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On an anniversary of tragedy and grief, local parents are still coming to terms with the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in which 20 children and six staff lost their lives to gunman Adam Lanza.

While the impulse to move on is strong, some parents have chosen to keep Newtown close in their thoughts.

Lebanon resident Kathryn Hassler, for one, is reminded of the Sandy Hook tragedy on a daily basis.

Hassler said she cut out and laminated the Hartford Courant's front page with pictures of all 26 killed at the elementary school and put it on the refrigerator in her home.

"I still have them here and I look at them every morning," said Hassler, who is mother to a kindergartner and a second-grader. "It's still very raw for me. You look at their little faces and I can't imagine (the families') total loss and devastation that they'll feel forever."

Though local parents admitted thoughts of Newtown will be inevitable today, many said they were going to discuss the tragedy only as necessary and, instead, embrace their own children with gratitude.

"My advice would be to keep the events in the back of your mind, but don't dwell on them, and don't dwell on them with your kids," said Windham school board member Michael Desaulniers, a father of three.

"Think about the future and enjoy the time with your kids. And spend it as productively as you can, because you never know," Desaulniers said.

Mansfield parent Stacy Geist, who is mother to three children spanning ages 8 to 17, said she and her family plan to spend today performing some act of kindness, "to try to do something to celebrate (the victims') lives."

Geist, who is a member of the Annie E. Vinton Elementary School's parent-teacher association, recalled learning of the tragedy Dec. 14 and wanting to run home to her children.

Once she got home, Geist carefully determined what each child had heard before discussing the shooting.

"A bad guy came into the school and hurt a bunch of kids," she told them and she answered questions as they arose.

"We don't want to not tell our kids, because you know they're going to find out about it, but at the same time, you want to make it so it's not so scary," Geist said.

In fact, back when the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks occurred, she chose not to tell her oldest child, then a kindergartner, about the event.

"I tried to shelter her completely and then it ended up being discussed in school," she said.

This time, she talked with her children, and then the family went out to dinner and a toy store.

"Never take your children to the toy store the night of a tragedy," she laughed, telling how she had acquiesced to nearly every toy request because she felt so emotional about her children that night.

Now, a year later, parents are still deciding how to balance their instincts to protect their children with their children's need to grow out into the world.

"The events that happened do affect the ways that we raise our children," Desaulniers said. "I guess we're a lot more protective than my parents were."

The Desaulniers will spend the day out, enjoying each other and avoiding the negativity of the past.

"There's nothing that we can do about this now, and my thought is, bringing this back up and letting a small child, second-grader, relive that story will do more harm than good. Because there's nothing a child can do to prevent something like that," Desaulniers said.

School safety concerns

Meanwhile, many parents said they are mixed on whether they feel their children are safe in their town's schools.

Kirsten Westbrook, a Lebanon resident, has one child at each school in Lebanon and said she "hasn't seen any real, significant changes at LES (Lebanon Elementary School)."

"I think there's been more of a police presence," she said, adding the district has not changed the way parents get into the building.

Westbrook, though a familiar face at the school, said she has been able to get into the building and walk around, without signing in or being tracked down by school staff.

She said "perhaps (the school district) doesn't see a need to increase how things are done."

The week following the shooting, Hassler said she thanked the state trooper in front of LES.

Now, a year later, Hassler said she wishes there was a trooper at the school every day.

In Coventry, resident Jillian Miner, mother of a 3-year-old and a kindergartner at Coventry Grammar School, said she feels her older child is safe in the school district.

"I feel like (the district) has taken a very active role in ensuring the children ... are safe," she said. "I know they've applied for grants to make things more secure in a positive way."

Unlike Miner, Rachel Chirico, a Coventry resident and mother of two daughters, with one at CGS, said she does not feel her children are safer in Coventry than they were last year.

"I feel that they are doing what they can, though," she said, adding the schools have been consistent in lockdown drills. "I just don't consider awareness to be a safeguard."

All of the mothers said they were aware of their surroundings before Newtown, but following Newtown they have a heightened awareness.

Westbrook said she worries about a tragedy like Newtown happening in Lebanon.

"After such a senseless crime like that, you do wonder if something like that could happen here," she said.

Westbrook said she was pregnant with her eldest daughter when the Columbine shooting occurred in 1999.

"That was something that really put me on heightened alert," she said. "I knew then that this was a possibility in my kids' lives in the future. That was when I became much, much more cautious."

She said she's "a lot more cautious" about what she's allowing her children to do.

For Hassler, it's more about "cherishing every day."

"You drop your kids off and every morning you wonder what's going to happen," she said, adding she has cried in her car on more than one occasion as her boys headed into LES.

Never forget

Many of the parents said they will never forget what happened that day one year ago.

Remembering Dec. 14, Westbrook said it was "really, really hard that day" as her kids shuffled into their home.

"Some news had already filtered to them," she said, adding she has discussed the tragedy with them. "It is a challenge."

Chirico said, at first, she was thinking about the Sandy Hook tragedy on a daily basis.

Today, she is reminded when alerts are sent out or when she finds out about the latest lockdown across the state.

"I immediately wonder where's my daughters," she said. "You don't take anything lightly anymore. You may have before."

"I don't look at any of them as false alarms," Chirico said.

At a certain point, though, all a parent can do is trust in humanity and move on.

"You just hope that you raise your kids right, and when they become adults, they make the right decisions throughout their life - and they don't ever become part of a story like that," Desaulniers said.

The events that happened do affect the ways that we raise our children.