

Helping children feel safe and manage distress after a tragic event

Recent national tragic events reported in the media have evoked many emotions including sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety and anger. As a parent or caregiver, you may be struggling with how to talk with your children as they look to you to make them feel safe.

Whether your child is a toddler, adolescent or young adult, these tips are designed to help you provide help and guidance during a time when many are struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images they encounter.

Start the conversation. Talk about the event with your child. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening in your child's mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible even to speak about or that you do not know what has happened. With social media, it is highly unlikely that children have not heard about this. Remember if you don't talk to your children about the incident, someone else will. Younger children may not be aware of the event and it may be enough to just ask what they have heard or been told by others. Following the lead of your child no matter what the age is always important.

Keep home a safe place. Children, regardless of age, often find home to be a safe haven when the world around them becomes overwhelming. During times of crisis, it is important to remember that your children may come home seeking the safe feeling they have being there. Help make it a place where your children find the solitude of comfort they need. Plan a night where everyone participates in a favorite family activity.

Watch for signs of stress, fear or anxiety. After a traumatic event, it is typical for children (and adults) to experience a wide range of emotions, including fearfulness, shock, anger, grief, and anxiety. Your children's behaviors may change because of their response to the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty with concentrating on school work, or changes in appetite. This is normal for everyone and should begin to disappear in a few months. Encourage your children to put their feelings into words by talking about them or journaling. Some children may find it helpful to express their feelings through art.

Take "news breaks". Your children may want to keep informed by gathering information about the event from the internet, television or newspapers. It is important to limit the amount of time spent watching the news because constant exposure may actually heighten their anxiety and fears. Also scheduling some breaks for yourself is important; allow yourself time to engage in activities you enjoy.

Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge. Explain that the emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors, military and other responsible adults are helping people who are hurt and working hard to keep us all safe.

Take care of yourself. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children. Be a model for your children on how to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules for activities such as family meals and exercise to help restore a sense of security and normalcy. Stay close to your children, as your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction.

Consider praying or thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families. It may be a good time to take your children to your place of worship, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.



For more information on how The Guidance Center may be able to help your child, contact Tracy Wyman, Assistant Director of Children's Home Based Services, at 734-785-7705 x7492 or twyman@guidance-center.org.

Sources: Talking to Children about the Shooting, www.NCTSN.org; Helping your children manage distress in the aftermath of a shooting, www.apa.org/helpcenter/aftermath.aspx; Tips for Parents and Teachers, www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/terror_general.aspx