

Talking to Children About Tragic Community Events

(Thanks to Dr. Judith Houle, Superintendent of the Belchertown, Ma, schools, for sharing this information.)

When a tragedy like a school shooting strikes, everyone's sense of safety becomes uncertain. As adults in the community, we find ourselves trying to answer our own and our children's questions that have no real answers. However, David Schonfeld, M.D., Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement offers the following guidelines for parents and other caregivers in talking to children about tragic events like this. I hope that you will find this information helpful in talking with your children this weekend.

Preschool

Keep it simple. Even if you think young children are blissfully unaware the news, if the tragedy is local or being discussed among parents, chances are they'll know that something's going on. Dr. Schonfeld suggests talking to your young children in simple and concrete terms. You can say, "there was a man who brought a gun to a school and hurt some people badly." Be honest and direct, but skip the details, which can be traumatizing.

Reassure, but don't lie. It's common for a preschooler to express very direct fears like, "I'm worried someone will come shoot us." If they do, Dr. Schonfeld says parents should reassure their kids without making any false promises or dismissing their concerns. "Tell them it's very unlikely something like that will occur."

Limit media exposure. You don't need to hide the newspaper during a tragedy, but you shouldn't have the news running 24/7, either. Dr. Schonfeld says studies have shown that repeated exposure to graphic details may make it harder for a child to cope with a tragedy. Try to watch the news when young kids are not in the room, and if they do hear a scary-sounding news snippet, address it simply and let them know you are doing everything you can to keep them safe.

Talk about what real guns can do. Whether they're playing with toy guns or simply making their fingers into the shape of a gun, preschoolers are typically aware of guns and need to understand the difference between a toy and a real weapon, says Hayley Sherwood, a psychologist who works with kids who are victims of trauma. "I would say, 'it's okay to play pretend guns, but real guns can hurt people and very scary things can happen with real guns.'"

Grade School

Be honest, but not explicit. Like preschoolers, the best approach for school-age kids is a direct and honest one. Sherwood suggests starting the conversation by asking what, if anything, they've heard about the shooting in school from their classmates or teacher. Correct any misinformation and answer questions honestly, with simple answers that don't delve into explicit, potentially traumatizing details.

Find out their fears. If you're going to try and comfort kids, you have to find out what's worrying them, says Dr. Schonfeld. "The fears children have might be different than adults and might be distorted and incomplete," he says. Speak in a calm, empathetic tone and make sure any conversation you have includes lots of opportunities for your kids to ask questions and share their concerns.

Share your feelings, too. It can be tempting to look like the stoic parent who has everything under control, but sharing some of your worries and fears -- without losing it completely -- is actually beneficial for kids. "It's not useful to see parents overwhelmed, but we can't ask our kids to share without sharing some ourselves," says Dr. Schonfeld.

Talk about safety measures in place. Let kids know that the adults in their lives are doing everything they can to assure they will stay safe. Talk about what you do to keep your home safe, such as locking doors or not opening the door for strangers. Don't falsely promise that these measures will definitely protect you and your children, but reassure your kids that the chances something bad will happen are very slim.

Middle/High School

Be as direct and honest. Sherwood says parents should let their kids know, "I know you know what happened. If you want to talk about it I'm here." If they ask a question such as, "why would somebody do this?" be honest that people sometimes have lots of anger and bad feelings that make them want to hurt and kill other people.

Think about social media exposure. Social media tools like Facebook and Twitter can make your kids feel like they're very much a part of a tragedy such as the Newtown, CT school shooting, says Dr. Schonfeld. While it's not realistic to ask your kids to stay off their smartphones or avoid their Twitter feeds completely, you should advise them to think carefully about their social media exposure and how much time they're spending reading, following and responding to what's on these outlets. And if they're upset by the constant stream of information, reassure them that you're available to talk -- and make sure they know it's okay to stop paying attention to the story and do something else. Reassure them that feeling different or angry is okay. Reassure your kids that an individual who committed such a crime has other serious problems and take the opportunity to talk about other troubling feelings your children might have.

Approach it from the third person. Teenagers are not exactly known for their willingness to communicate with their parents, but Schonfeld says you can sometimes back into a conversation by saying something like this at the dinnertable: "So I heard about this on the news. What were your friends saying about this?" Never force your kids to talk, but let them know you are there if they are ever ready to discuss it.

Don't feel obligated to give a reason for what happened. "Resist the temptation to come up with simple answers to complex situations," says Dr. Schonfeld. Although parents often want to provide a reason for why someone committed such a crime, the reality is

we just don't quite know. And that's okay.

[Click here to see an excellent video on the subject of talking to children about tragic events like this.](#)