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## School Shootings and Other Traumatic Events: How To Talk To Students



By Cindy Long

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All too often gun violence and mass shootings top the headlines in

America, causing anxiety and confusion among young people. To help students who are continually hearing about senseless gun violence in or near schools and are scared about their safety, we offer advice from the National Association of School Psychologists for talking to them about violence and other national tragedies:

**Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

**Create time to listen and be available to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**

- **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
- **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
- **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

**Review school safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.

**Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professional right away if you are at all concerned.

**Limit media exposure.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Monitor what kids are viewing online and how they are consuming information about the event through social media. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they

have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.

**Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed. A lot of these tips can also be applied to educators — to take proper care of their students, they must first take care of themselves.

### **More Resources for Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events**

- **NEA's School Crisis Guide** A step-by-step outline of what to do before, during, and after any school or community crisis like a school shooting or natural disaster. NEA offers best practices that address the full spectrum of crisis response from how to prevent and prepare for a crisis to how to respond and recover in the minutes, days and weeks following the event..
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network** NCTSN has several pdfs and other resources for helping parents and children deal with catastrophic mass violence events, including parent tips for helping school-age children after disasters, which lists children's reactions with examples of how parents should respond and what they should say.
- **Talking to Children About Tragedies and Other News Events** The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages parents, teachers, child care providers, and others who work closely with children to filter information about the crisis and present it in a way that their child can accommodate, adjust to, and cope with.
- **How to Help Kids Feel Safe After Tragedy** It's normal for both adults and kids to feel anxious after such a publicly devastating event, but there are things you can do to minimize the stress and maintain a sense of normalcy.
- **Incidents of Mass Violence** Learn about who is most at risk for emotional distress from incidents of mass violence and where to find disaster-related resources.

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