

How to Talk with Children and Adolescents After a Tragic Event

You may hear children/adolescents voice these themes:

- feeling vulnerable and unsafe
- concern for the impact on others
- Distressing images/media coverage
- changes in psychosocial adjustment (such as nightmares, sleep, being afraid of being alone / strangers)
- returning to daily life (when will things get back to 'normal')

Parents and teachers can help children re-establish a sense of safety and predictability

Children, adolescents and communities commonly experience a deep sense of loss and uncertainty after a tragic event. Loss and uncertainty is not only about those who have died or were injured, but also about the impacts on those involved, from police, to emergency personnel, to doctors, nurses and all of their families.

To counteract this, parents and teachers can help children re-develop a sense of control and predictability. For instance, parents and teachers can give children choices, respect their decisions, and help them achieve their own goals, thereby increasing the children's agency and confidence. Parents and teachers can also support feelings of security and safety by sticking to routines for children's daily activities and schedules. By gaining control and predictability, children will be less likely to perceive threat in the environment caused by unpredictable events and feel safer.

Conversations That Might Unintentionally Make Things Worse

Do not focus on a "bad person". This increases fear and threat perception and may increase fear-related problems such as nightmares and difficulty concentrating.

What to say if the child brings up the "bad person"

Try using a community-centred social justice approach. Everyone (children, adolescents, adults) cares about fairness and justice, and wants to do the right thing. This might include saying something along the lines of "Sometimes people feel that life is unfair to them. This person chose violence to express their feelings. Violence is always, always wrong (we don't really understand why this person chose such violence.)" And then focus on (1) What are the needs of our family/classroom/school/community? How can we help? And, as needed, "Our police arrested the shooter. Our justice system will deal with this person in a fair way. We live in a fair society." If there is dispute about fairness, ask "What can we do to make it more fair/better?"

Do not say "everything will be ok" or focus on "resilience". Do not offer advice on how to recover.

Attempting to support someone by offering advice and encouraging "recovery" are more likely to be unhelpful. People often feel let down by this form of "social support". This is because their worries and fears are not being listened to and/or they understand that such reassurances are not reliable. Don't say "everything will be ok" because no one can foresee the future, so this is a false promise, and can be perceived as such by children, who often ask a follow-up question such as, "How can you know?"

Do not avoid conversations about the event.

Although parents and teachers may want to protect children from information on the events, this is almost impossible to achieve. It is more realistic for parents and teachers to accept that news coverage, social media coverage, and conversations about tragic events will have been experienced by children and adolescents.

Do not pretend that such events do not affect parents and teachers.

Although it may seem natural for parents/teachers to want to reassure children and adolescents by pretending that distressing events do not emotionally affect them, it is far more helpful for parents/teachers to talk about their own feelings and thoughts, and about positive coping strategies that they have learnt to use, whilst remaining calm (modelling).

Do not prevent children from talking about what they have heard or seen.

Let children take the lead in asking questions. Do not start out explaining or talking or lecturing. This is because the information given in such a context may not be understood correctly by the child, it may not actually be relevant to what they are thinking, they may not be ready for it, it may not be at their developmental or emotional level. Instead, wait for the child to volunteer a question or a thought, idea or fear. Use their initiated comments and questions to help the child understand what they have perceived as being most important, in language they can understand, but in as accurate a way as you can - and use the points discussed below:

Important tips for discussing media or events or fears that the child/adolescent brings up:

- Model confidence in their current security and safety
- Maintain a calm routine
- Condemn violence in any context or situation
- Positively identify or praise (e.g., "that's a great way to think of things")
- Introduce positive and hopeful aspects of the situation (e.g. police arrested the man, people brought flowers, comforted each other, doctors and nurses worked through the night, the Prime Minister spoke to the nation and to the leaders of the world, teachers kept children safe.)
- Point out the protections available to them in their schools and homes
- Describe to the child that you yourself have sometimes felt afraid (in the past) but then you found a way to cope (e.g., "I turned off the tv and my phone, I drank some water and made a list of the good things in my life like my friends and went to bed early")

Positive "I statements" can help to avoid feelings of helplessness:

Positive statements young child:

- I can hold my teddy or my teacher's hand when I'm scared
- I can take a flower to my mum to show her love
- I can hold the hand of a child who is crying
- I can draw a picture / sing a song together

Positive statements school child:

- I can talk to my parents /teacher when I feel scared
- I can turn off the TV
- I can focus on my homework
- I can play with my friends
- I can help other people - parents with chores, neighbours

Positive statements adolescent:

- I can call a helpline when I am scared
- I can speak up if I see bullying
- I could try to spend less time on social media and do something for others instead
- I can help my little brother with his homework
- We can learn about and discuss inclusion and social justice
- We can study the importance of tolerance and diversity