

**HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAGIC LOSS-** Robert Evans, Ed.D.

Tragic loss of any kind, reverberates throughout a school and a community. Like everyone else, parents and teachers feel shock and disbelief, followed by immediate concern about those who have been impacted by a critical event and/or traumatic loss--and then by concern about impact on their own children and students. All of us who are raising or working with children worry about helping them understand how such a thing could happen, especially when we ourselves cannot always make sense of it. We worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect solution, there are five guidelines that can often make a positive difference in talking with children.

1. **It is helpful not to over-assume** what the tragedy means to children. They react differently depending on their age, their closeness to the situation, their own personalities, what they hear and are told, and their family's pattern of communication. Some may be deeply moved, others less so. Some may have many questions, others fewer. Not all will be intensely affected. Showing little reaction does not automatically mean a student is hiding or denying his or her feelings.

2. **Young people are remarkably resilient.** They may become quite upset, but given a chance to express what they feel, they usually resume their normal lives--and often do so more rapidly than we adults. Tragic deaths can actually hit adults harder than they do teenagers or young children. Most young people do not benefit from extensive, probing adult-led questioning about their reactions. They do profit from simple, direct information and from adults being available to respond to their questions and to listen.

3. If you receive difficult questions from children it can be useful to understand these before answering them. Often a request for information is spurred not only by curiosity, but by a feeling. Usually, the child already has some idea about this. We may be more helpful if, rather than plunging into an immediate answer, **we learn what motivates the question.** This is particularly true if the question is a difficult one. Parents can say, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" Also, it can be good to ask "What ideas do you have?" Once you know the meaning of the question, it is easier to answer effectively.

4. There may be questions we cannot answer, which can make us feel inadequate. But children and teenagers are typically more comforted by straight talk than by false assurances. Rather than to invent a response, it can be much more helpful to **say, "I don't know,"** or "I'll try to find out."

5. Coping with a tragedy is not primarily a matter of technique, not something best handled by a "strategy" that deviates sharply from a family's or a school's familiar patterns of communication. The routines of school, for example, are all by themselves a source of comforting continuity and assurance. Parents and teachers both will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and children--**caring and connection.** At these times, even if everyone feels deeply upset, your presence--your simply being with them, their knowing that you are available--will be reassuring.

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How to help children cope:

- Listen to and accept children's feelings.
- Give honest, simple, brief answers to their questions.
- Make sure they understand your answers and the meaning you intend.
- Use words or phrases that won't confuse a child or make the world more frightening.
- Create opportunities for children to talk with each other about what happened and how they are feeling.
- Give your child an honest explanation. If you are feeling so upset you don't want to talk about what happened. You may want to take "time out" and ask a trusted family friend to help.
- If children keep asking the same question over and over again it is because they are trying to understand; trying to make sense out of the disruption and confusion in their world. Younger children will not understand that death is permanent, so their repeated inquiries are because they expect everything to return to normal.
- If the child feels guilty, ask him or her to explain what happened. Listen carefully to whether he or she attaches a sense of responsibility to some part of the description. Explain the facts of the situation and emphasize that no one, least of all the child, could have prevented it.
- Let the school help. The child's teacher can be sensitive to changes in the child's behavior and will be able to respond in a helpful way.
- Even if you feel the world is an unsafe place, you can reassure your child by saying, "The event is over. Now we'll do everything possible to stay safe, and together we can help get things back to normal."
- Notice when children have questions and want to talk.
- Be especially loving and supportive; children need you at this time.

## General Advice when responding to a crisis with children

### **ALL ADULTS SHOULD:**

**Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.

**Reassure** children that they are safe and so are the other important adults in their lives. Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.

Let children know that **it is okay to feel upset**. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

**Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns orally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.

**Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening. (caution about developmental appropriateness)

**Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

**Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. 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. 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. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!

## **WHAT PARENTS CAN DO**

**Focus on your children** over the next day or so. Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.

**Make time to talk with your children.** Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.

**Stay close to your children.** Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.

**Maintain a "normal" routine.** To the extent possible stick to your family's normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., but don't be inflexible. Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.

**Spend extra time** reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed. These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.

**Safeguard your children's physical health.** Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise and nutrition.

It may be a good time to take your children to church or the synagogue, 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.

Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope. Most schools are likely to be open and often are a good place for children to regain a sense of normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers can help. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children and adults who need it.

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