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Talking To Kids About School Safety

School violence and the resulting intense media coverage bring school safety issues to the forefront for all of us. However, children, in particular, may experience anxiety, fear, and a sense of personal risk. Knowing how to talk with your child about school safety issues could be critical in recognizing and preventing acts of violence, and will play an important role in easing fear and anxieties about their personal safety.

To guide parents through discussions about school violence, Mental Health America offers the following suggestions:

Encourage children to talk about their concerns and to express their feelings. Some children may be hesitant to initiate such conversation, so you may want to prompt them by asking if they feel safe at school. When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term "violence" but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them.

Talk honestly about your own feelings regarding school violence. It is important for children to recognize they are not dealing with their fears alone.

Validate the child's feelings. Do not minimize a child's concerns. Let him/her know that serious school violence is not common, which is why incidents such as Columbine and Conyers, Georgia, attract so much media attention. Stress that schools are safe places. In fact, recent studies have shown that schools are more secure now than ever before.

Empower children to take action regarding school safety. Encourage them to report specific incidents (such as bullying, threats or talk of suicide) and to develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Encourage older children to actively participate in student-run anti-violence programs.

Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your child's school. Explain why visitors sign in at the principal's office or certain doors remain locked during the school day. Help your child understand that such precautions are in place to ensure his or her safety and stress the importance of adhering to school rules and policies.

Create safety plans with your child. Help identify which adults (a friendly secretary, trusted teacher or approachable administrator) your child can talk to if they feel threatened at school. Also ensure that your child knows how to reach you (or another family member or friend) in case of crisis during the school day. Remind your child that they can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.

Recognize behavior that may indicate your child is concerned about returning to school. Younger children may react to school violence by not wanting to attend school or participate in school-based activities. Teens and adolescents may minimize their concerns outwardly, but may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.

Keep the dialogue going and make school safety a common topic in family discussions rather than just a response to an immediate crisis. Open dialogue will encourage children to share their concerns.

Seek help when necessary. If you are worried about a child's reaction or have ongoing concerns about his/her behavior or emotions, contact a mental health professional at school or at your community mental health center. Your local Mental Health Association or the National Mental Health Association's Information Center can direct you to resources in your community.

The following behaviors are signs that a child may need help:

- Lack of interest or poor performance in school
- Absence of age-appropriate anger control skills
- Seeing self as always the victim
- Persistent disregard for or refusal to follow rules
- Cruelty to pets or other animals
- Artwork or writing that is bleak or violent or that depicts isolation or anger
- Talking constantly about weapons or violence
- Obsession with violent games and/or TV shows
- Lack of enthusiasm, energy or motivation



Helping Children Cope With Tragedy

Young children shouldn't have to learn about tragic events, but they do. Some are exposed to disasters firsthand, as victims. Others discover the tragedies by watching the news or overhearing adults or other children discussing the events. It is a sad fact that all children need to know how to deal with tragic events—and their parents and caregivers need to know how to help them cope.

IF YOUR CHILD IS THE VICTIM OF A DISASTER:

Try to stay calm. Children often react the way they see adults react. As difficult as it is, it is very important for you to remain calm and reassuring, and to let your children know that, no matter what, they will be taken care of.

Explain, but don't provide unnecessary details. Clearly, children need to know the truth, but they don't need to hear about all of the consequences. Give them the facts that they need to know at that moment, but don't share with them your fears about the future.

Make time to talk to your children. In disastrous situations, adults are often so preoccupied with the immediate needs that they forget their children are aware of what's happening. Make sure they know they can talk to you, and that you'll spend the time they need answering their questions and comforting them.

Get counseling. It is important to help children cope with serious life-changing events. Talk with the school counselor about the situation, then set up a time for your children to come in and "vent." Follow-up appointments with the counselor or other experts can help your children overcome their fears.

IF YOUR CHILD IS AWARE OF A TRAGIC EVENT

Limit TV coverage. Because children can be overwhelmed with the tragedy, limit their TV exposure of the event. Instead, check in periodically with the news, and focus on finding ways to distract your children with other activities.

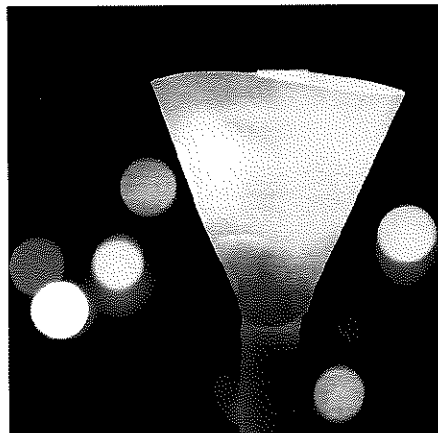
Be extra comforting. Even if they don't seem to be alarmed, children who are aware of disastrous events can absorb the trauma and be quietly disturbed. Make extra time for quiet activities with your children, such as reading or taking a walk; and give them plenty of hugs.

Watch for behavior changes. Children often don't talk about being afraid, but their behavior can be a clue that they're scared. They might have a hard time sleeping or might wake up from a bad nightmare. Sometimes, they adopt behaviors, like thumb sucking, bedwetting, or baby talk. Others get irrationally angry or sad, and many withdraw and stop socializing. If you see any of these behaviors after a traumatic event, it means your child needs extra help and comfort.

Make sure they know that there are people in charge who are helping.

Children need to know that things will eventually be okay again and that there are adults in charge who are helping to make it right. Talk to your children about the people who are helping resolve the consequences of the disaster, and share your admiration with them about the great work these people are doing.

Do something for others. One way to help children cope in the aftermath of a disaster is to find a way, through your community, to help those affected. Schools, churches, temples, synagogues, and organizations like the Red Cross are great places to go to find out how you and your children can help.



Carrying a weapon to school

Overreacting to criticism

Restlessness and agitation

Bullying

Misplaced or unwarranted jealousy

Involvement with or interest in gangs

Withdrawal from friends and activities

The more signs you see the greater the chance the child needs help. Mental Health America's toll-free Information Line can help parents and teachers find community resources. Mental Health America also provides informational brochures on children's mental health issues, such as a *Teen Survival Guide to Surviving Stress*, *Teen Depression*, *Coping with Loss*, *Youth Violence* and *What Every Child Needs for Good Mental Health*.