

Article

HANDLE WITH CARE: SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE DURING CRISES

People are continuously struggling to respond when traumatizing events occur in our communities, across the country and around the world. For families, educators and community members who must respond to the needs of children as a traumatizing event unfolds, we've gathered recommendations and resources to support you.

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People are continuously struggling to respond when traumatizing events occur in our communities, across the country and around the world. Videos of these incidents are typically shared across social media platforms and become a constant feature in broadcast news cycles. While adults should

prepare to engage young people in conversations about what's happening around them, we must always consider the well-being of all children, and especially those who may witness or are personally affected by these events.

The entire community is responsible for protecting and supporting children, especially in times of crisis. In empathizing with families, educators and community members who must respond to the needs of children as a traumatizing event unfolds, we've gathered recommendations and resources to help guide conversations with young people and to manage potential subsequent actions and reactions. Some LFJ resources contain recommendations from the National Association of School Psychologists, the Child Mind Institute and the American School Counselor Association.

In responding to crisis events, keep the following in mind for conversations with young people:

Listen and Hold Space

Please pay attention to how children respond to news about what is happening in the world around them. When something bad happens, it's of immediate importance to young people to share their feelings or thoughts, so it will occupy their minds whether you discuss it or not. Hold space for conversations and do not dismiss their questions, concerns or comments. Encourage young people to journal and draw to share their thoughts, or allow them privacy if they choose not to express their feelings at the moment.

Provide a Sense of Safety

Young people need to know they are safe, so be intentional about fostering feelings of safety when they are in your care. Review safety procedures at home and at school and identify adults who children can go to if they feel threatened or unsafe.

As misinformation typically spreads rapidly following a crisis, adults should help young people vet information and have a critical eye for breaking news. For example, if a shooting has occurred, there may be profiles of the shooter meant to cater to stereotypes. Look for trustworthy sources and remain skeptical. Steer young people toward facts and big ideas; avoid speculation.

It's also vital to monitor screen time. Discourage nonstop, uninterrupted footage of an unfolding crisis. Limiting the consumption of traumatizing media content during a crisis is important to maintaining children's sense of well-being. Carefully select what to watch together with children so they can

discuss and share their feelings about what is happening.

Adults must keep explanations and discussions developmentally appropriate. For example, young children need brief, simple information balanced with reassurance that they are safe.

Model Empathy

How we experience and respond to tragic events varies, so be sensitive to people around you, especially young people. Children pick up on your emotions, and your reactions to events can affect them. Show kindness and empathy for feelings that might come up.

Recognize that children may not only fear for themselves, so consider how crisis events might make them worry about losing parents, family members, teachers and others they depend on in their lives. For young children, give comfort and reassurance with gentle words, and don't dismiss their fears.

Support young children with comfort and give them opportunities to play and share their feelings in multiple ways. Whether in the classroom or at home, engage in stress-reducing activities, such as creating art or utilizing a Peace Corner, where children can have a safe space to process their feelings privately.

Be aware of young people who are managing trauma or who have experienced violence. Monitor reactions and recognize that trauma can manifest in various behaviors, including anger and disengagement. Commit to destigmatizing mental health issues. For example, separate conversations about violence from issues of mental health.

Brainstorm Action Items

Help young people translate feelings of hopelessness or apathy into opportunities to respond with productive action. Join them in brainstorming ways they can support survivors and families experiencing trauma. Activities might include fundraising, volunteering, donating clothes and personal items, attending vigils or protests, signing petitions and writing supportive letters to people affected by tragedy. Read "Digging Deep Into the Social Justice Standards: Action" for ideas on ways to take action in your community.

Embrace Self-Care and Seek Community-Care

We must always care for ourselves and our children's emotional and mental health needs. Check in with your own feelings and give yourself grace for whatever comes up.

Remember that individual responses and the impact of violence may not be immediately clear, so be observant and maintain open communication, especially with young people. Sometimes anger can manifest in behaviors later, and sadness can become feelings of despair. If you or the children in your life are having a hard time coping with these events (for example, there are signs of sleeplessness, anxiety, depression, or behavioral concerns), please reach out for professional counseling support.

Community care is just as critical as self-care. Lean into your community to receive support and to offer support. Community care may look like donating to mutual aid funds, helping clean up after a disaster, providing food to a neighbor or offering a free service such as transportation.