



Virginia Academy of School Psychologists

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Addressing Acts of Violence in Schools

A Guide for Educators and Parents

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What to look for:

Be on the lookout for physical symptoms of anxiety that children may demonstrate depending on age. They may be a sign that a child, although not directly discussing the tragedy, is very troubled by the recent events. Talk more directly to children who exhibit these signs:

- Headaches
- Excessive worry
- Stomach aches
- Increased arguing
- Back aches
- Irritability
- Trouble sleeping or eating
- Loss of concentration
- Nightmares
- Withdrawal
- Refusal to go to school
- Clinging behavior

* The presence of one or more of these symptoms is typical but seek professional assistance if they persist and continue to interfere with daily activities and school functioning

* **Look for children at greater risk** (e.g., children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs)

How to talk about it:

1. **Model calm reactions.** Children often base their reactions off adults' reactions.
2. **Reassure children that they are safe** and that trustworthy people are dedicated to ensuring their safety.
3. **Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. What they are feeling is normal.
4. **Tell children the truth and stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Limit media coverage of tragedy.
5. **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 and threats to safety 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.

What to Do:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **Find out what resources your school and community has in place to help children cope.**
4. **Empower students** by reviewing safety procedures, differentiating between possibility and probability of something similar happening, reminding them of what to do in case of an emergency
5. **Communicate with parents** about conversations that school personnel have with students
6. **Take time to yourself** to cope with and manage your reactions to the tragedy.
7. **Monitor social media viewing and usage.** Verify that social media sources are reputable and credible. Carefully monitor students’ use social media at school. Schools can consider policies about the use of and proper etiquette of social media tools to be helpful in a crisis versus harmful.

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