

Discussion Guide for parents after school shooting

No one could have imagined that this could happen. The shock is so great it is difficult to know what might be best for children. This guideline is a starting place for parents and loving adults to help children regain a sense of safety in the world. Remember, violence is not specifically a school problem, it is a societal problem, and more children die from gun-related incidents away from school than at school. Media coverage of school events make them seem like the greatest threat, but schools are still the safest place for your child to be.

Routine gives us a sense of security. Having something like this occur anywhere is terrible. Having it occur in one's own neighborhood is at least frightening and for some, terrifying. Children and youth may feel they've lost all sense of security. You can help your child by keeping the routines that give life structure and giving them warning when something will change. Some children may have coped very well in the past when a parent was late home from work, but now that sort of uncertainty may bring about fear or anxiety for the child.

Turn off the TV! There is a psychological saturation that comes from watching news coverage of these events, and the healthiest thing for you to talk about this with your child, and to be playing games, reading, drawing, writing and being together. Television coverage stimulates fears and other negative reactions.

Bedtime rituals can be very helpful for all ages of children and youth. It can be quite informal or more structured. You could drop into your child's bedroom shortly before bed time and sit down on the bed and check in, or you might create a very specific ritual, especially with younger children. Read stories. Play CDs of lullabies or soothing music. Sing songs together. Light a candle for a few minutes and see how that changes the quality of your conversation. Being intentional about checking in before bedtime each evening is very helpful, even if you don't ask your child isn't anything specifically related to the shooting. Having a parent sit on the edge of the bed for a few minutes is very reassuring. You could talk about gratitude for something that you have in life, sharing in prayer or maybe talking about one thing they look forward to.

Night terrors, nightmares, flashbacks and other disconcerting re-visiting of the trauma are common. If children want to sleep close to you for awhile, that's fine. Bring a sleeping bag into your bedroom for a few nights. If they don't want to move back, "help" them back into their rooms by moving them slowly further away, and then shifting to you staying with them until they fall asleep (but being honest that you are going to sleep in your own bed). For a short time, indulge children in ways that help them feel safe enough to sleep. If night time anxiety continues, contact the school counselor for suggestions or for a referral.

Help children anticipate anxieties or fears. When you've been through a frightening event, some things like sirens or loud noises might bring up instant fear. Remind children that you're always willing to listen to fears.

Answer questions honestly, but in appropriate doses and protecting them from unnecessary trauma. For instance, when children ask what "execution style" shooting is, you might say, "It means intentional," which is truthful, but not graphic or with unnecessary detail.

Self-soothing varies from child to child, so try to help children come up with ideas about how they can help themselves feel better when they begin to worry. Children often think they're the only ones worrying about something. Help them create a list of all the things kids their age can do to help themselves feel better.

Resist the impulse to always have an answer. We often feel that we need to have an answer or to take away the pain... to give hope when there is fear. Sometimes this is our own discomfort in seeing children suffer. Voice your belief that we get through these things together, and that somehow, you'll cope and recover. That also means that **it is important for parents to allow their children to participate in the discussions that teachers will lead in the classroom.** This is actually very reassuring to children, because they see that others feel the same kinds of fears they feel, and also the teachers invite children to tell the school staff what will help them feel safe. The children's concerns will be communicated to the principals, and this feels empowering for the students.

Entertainment and diversion are helpful. It is really important to have breaks from the grieving, the worry, the event. Go out for pizza... go to non-violent, light and entertaining movies. Taking a break isn't disrespectful -- it allows us to recharge our energies. The bad news isn't going away. The breaks just give us time to regenerate so we can continue to cope. That means that parents need breaks, too.

How to get your kids to talk when they don't seem to want to? Often it is because we ask questions that are quite direct, like "Are you worried about a school shooting happening in your school?" A way of asking those questions in a way that feels safer for kids to answer is to make the child the expert, and ask as if you're wanting advice or insight. "What kinds of things do you think kids are worried about? What do you think the kids at school want the principal to know?" This strategy **gives them a full "step" of distance** from the question, making it less personal. By doing this, children can talk about their fears without feeling so vulnerable, because they are thinking of it as though they're speaking for others. **And my favorite question for kids....** "What do you most wish adults understood about what it is like for you right now?"

The fastest way to keep kids from talking more once they open up is to give advice or try to take away their pain! Of course you want to take away the pain and fear. But the most empowering part of this is for kids to talk without interruption about how this is for them. Don't rush in with advice on why they don't have to worry. Ask questions like, "Can you help me understand more about that?" or "When you think about that, what is the next thing that comes to mind?"

Often emotions are so overwhelming that staying more cognitive is helpful. That means focusing on what children think instead of what they feel part of the time. Often emotions defy description and sometimes it makes us feel vulnerable to focus on feelings. Try asking some questions that are more cognitive than emotion based, such as questions about what they think instead of what they feel, what anyone can do now that will help, how you can help them plan how to feel safer. This sometimes brings a sense of control that then allows children to talk about feelings more easily. Alternate focus on thoughts and feelings.

Using art is a great way of "seeing" how your child is doing and starting conversation. **Gratitude** and other positive feelings are important right now. Spend time with focus on gratitude, empathy, hope, relationships, and on the importance of tolerance and acceptance for others and friendships.

Reassure children that, although this was terrifying, it is extremely unusual for people to be so mentally upset and out of control that they will do this sort of thing. Help them realize that, although this happened very close by, it is extremely unusual. Help them discern the difference in "everyday anger" that we all have and how this is different. Don't make promises you can't keep, however, so don't promise it won't happen. If your child is anxious about **going back to school**, allow him or her to call you during the day so you can encourage them to stay at school. Voice your faith that the school is doing many things to keep kids safe, especially now.

Most important: **Children will do as well as the adults around them.** Take care of yourself. Remember not to voice your fears to your children; voice your concerns to your school administrators or other adults who can help you with your fears, but don't feed them to your children! Voice confidence in their safety at school. Visit our web site at <www.cmionline.org> and look on the home page in the lower right corner for the "free downloads" link. There are other helpful guidelines for parents and others on helping children cope at difficult times. And remember! Your children are lucky to have you -- and your community is lucky to have dedicated school staff. Together you can make a difference that neither of you can make alone. Reach out and be part of what brings support to all of the children and youth. Really, all kids are "our kids". No one could have imagined that this could happen. The shock is so great it is difficult to know what might be best for children. This guideline is a starting place for parents and loving adults to help children regain a sense of safety in the world. Remember, violence is not specifically a school problem, it is a societal problem, and more children die from gun-related incidents away from school than at school. Media coverage of school events make them seem like the greatest threat, but schools are still the safest place for your child to be.