

Going Back to School After a Tragedy

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Support and routine are essential for children

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When tragedy strikes a school community — whether it’s a [death at your child’s school](#) or a loss of life so horrific that it affects us all, like the shootings at Newtown, Connecticut — the prospect of sending kids back to school can be daunting. But it’s an important milestone, because it is essential that children get back into ordinary routines after hearing [disturbing and frightening news](#). Children find comfort in the familiar, and going back to school and any after-school activities helps build healthy, resilient children.

But after an event like a school shooting, some kids might be hesitant about going back to school. Here are some tips for helping kids worried about going back:

Take your cues from your child

Invite your child to tell you how they feel about going back to school. Don’t ask leading questions — “Are you worried about going back to school?” — but do give them an opportunity to express what’s on their mind. Assuming you’ve discussed the shooting, you might ask if they expect to discuss it at school, or whether they expect any school activities relating to it.

Give them ample opportunity to ask questions

It’s reassuring to children, and helps diminish frightening fantasies, to express what they’re worried about. If your child is thinking that their classroom may no longer be — or feel — safe, it’s good to listen to those fears.

Acknowledge their feelings, but remain calm

You can let your child know that you can understand why they might be uneasy. And then you can have a factual conversation about how [rare school shootings are](#). You can also assure them that when they happen, they are investigated carefully, to identify causes and help prevent it from happening again. It’s confidence-building for kids to know that we learn from negative experiences.

Emphasize school safety

Remind your child that their school is a very safe place, filled with teachers and other adults who love children and have dedicated their lives to helping them. Remind them of the drills and policies already in place to keep students safe.

Give extra reassurance

Don't be surprised if your child is unusually clingy or needy, and do be prepared to slow your morning routines and be physically affectionate and comforting.

Listen when they're *not* talking

Be on the lookout for nonverbal cues indicating anxiety. The 8-year-old who hasn't asked you about the event but who has seen the images, and whose sleep and eating habits have changed after the tragedy, may need to have a conversation — even if they aren't asking in words.

Know who else can help

Teachers and school counselors will be ready to help children with any concerns they might have while they are in school. Encourage your child to talk to them if they are feeling overwhelmed on the first day back or later in the week. Let them know that it's fine to bring the subject up again to you or anyone else if they have questions or feelings they want to share later.

Finally, if you think that one of your children has been seriously impacted, please don't hesitate to reach out to the Child Mind Institute. You can contact us at (212) 308-3118.

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