

Talking Points: Helping Youth Following Mass Violence

Mass violence is shocking and disturbing to youth on so many levels. One is that it disrupts the way that they see the world. When threat is minimal, youth see the world as a safe and meaningful place and they feel a sense of control over their environment. When threat is high, youth can feel out of control, unsafe and that the world has lost its meaning. They can begin to worry that dangerous things can befall them or those they love. When violence is perpetrated by adults, the very people youth look to for protection, the impact is powerful. Additionally, venues such as movie theatres and other public places of entertainment are where youth and their families go for fun and relaxation and where they feel safe and free from harm.

Parents and school personnel can be helpful in mitigating the emotional effects of community violence on youth. Below are some strategies for dealing with these tragedies and assisting youth in regaining their sense of safety and security.

- **Monitor the amount of TV watching**

These kinds of events attract mass media attention. Frightening, dramatic and sad images are often repetitively displayed in newsprint, on television or radio. Watching these kinds of scenes may fixate the images of violent death and increase feelings of vulnerability. It is important to monitor what youth are viewing and limit their exposure to upsetting media coverage.

- **Ask your children what they have heard or what other kids are saying.**

Give youth accurate information and correct any misinformation. Gear the information to their age and refrain from focusing on the graphic details of the incident. They may ask what homicide means. While it is not necessary to go into detail, you may want to say “It means that someone killed another person on purpose; it was not an accident.”

Children often have many developmental issues regarding the integrity of the body. Hearing about the death of someone close to their age, especially a death that was violent can increase anxiety about their own body. Some children may ask specific questions like “What happens when you get shot?” You can answer the question in a more clinical way, avoiding the graphic details. For example: “When you get shot, it can injure the part of the body that got hit. Sometimes the injury can be so serious it can make the heart stop working and the person dies. Sometimes a person is not injured as badly and they can go to the hospital and be taken care of by the doctors and nurses and then go home to their families.”

- **Find out what concerns your child has and take them seriously**

Youth often feel more vulnerable than adults because of their size and their limited physical and emotional resources. Therefore, some of their fears may seem trivial or unrealistic to adults but can occupy the youth’s thoughts and dreams just the same. It is important to take their concerns seriously and offer reassurance.

You can ask them “After hearing about these kinds of things, what do you think most kids worry about?”

- **Tackle the tough questions**

Children will ask questions like “why did this happen?” Imbedded in this question are several others: “How could someone get so out of control to do this kind of thing?” and “Could this happen to me or to people I love?”

- **Why did this happen?**

Explain to youth “we may not know the exact reason why this violence occurred, but it is clear that the person that did these things was very troubled and was not able to think clearly about how to deal with their thoughts, feelings and problems. The result was that they were not able to control their impulses or urges to hurt others. They also did not tell anyone about their thoughts, feelings and problems in time for others to help them figure out good ways to fix them without hurting anyone.

This is a good time to teach the importance of help seeking. Explain to children “sometimes people have thoughts and feelings that make them feel hurt, angry, confused, or scared inside. It is important for everyone to have someone to talk to who can help them solve problems and feel better. Ask your child “who would you talk to if you were feeling hurt or scared or confused inside?” Have them name several adults inside and outside the family so their support system is enlarged.

➤ **Could this happen to me or to people that I care about?**

To balance the enormity of violent acts, it is important to explain to youth that “these kinds of events are very unusual. Most people do not want to hurt others. You can speculate with them about the number of movie theatres in the United States (or the world for that matter) and compare that number with the number of movie theatres in which this kind of violence has occurred. This is not to minimize the horrific impact of these events but to put them into a perspective that will help youth regain a feeling of safety.

It is important to bring the discussion back to the youth’s own experiences and talk about the adults in their life who love them and are there to protect them. It is also helpful to talk about the ways in which the impacted community has come together to help each other cope during this terrible event. Focus on stories that include caring acts of kindness, compassion and resilience even in the face of the tragedy.

• **Keep the routine**

Routine provides youth with a sense of security. The routine of daily activities including school, after school activities and sports are important to mitigate the feeling that the ‘world is out of control’.

• **Spend time together as a family**

Increase opportunities for play, fun and relaxation. Connecting with friends and family members helps children feel there is a safety net of people around them.

• **Allow some time for extra comforting**

Youth often need some additional time for soothing and comforting when they are dealing with upsetting circumstances. Extra hugs, cuddling, and story telling (even middle school youth enjoy having their parents read to them), are helpful. After these kinds of incidents, children and teens may have nightmares or fears. It might be helpful to allow the child to sleep in close proximity to the parents for a bit of time. Sleeping bags or cots could be used for a few nights.

If you find that your child is having difficulty staying in school because of anxiety, you may want to arrange with the counseling department to allow one phone call to you during lunch. Do all you can to help your child go to school and remain there.

• **Process your own feelings**

Youth will take their cues from the adults around them. It is important for the adults to take care of themselves and their feelings as well as their child’s. If you are feeling upset, anxious or fearful it will be important for you to find a trusted adult to talk to. Avoid talking about your fears in front of your children.

• **Monitor your child’s behavior and seek assistance if necessary**

While the signs and symptoms below can be normal in the early days and weeks following a violent incident, if they do not abate or they increase, additional help may be required. If you have concerns about your child, do not hesitate to contact your school’s counseling department or your local community behavioral health center.

- Somatic complaints (stomachaches, headaches and muscle pain)
- Changes in eating
- Changes in behavior (increase in irritability, aggression, anger, or becoming more fearful and clinging)
- Changes in school performance
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nightmares
- Inability to stop thinking about the event
- Refusing to attend school or go into public places
- Worrying excessively about something bad happening to them or someone they love