Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Families and Educators

High profile acts of mass violence, particularly in schools, can confuse and frighten children and youth who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved ones are at risk. They will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Adults themselves may struggle with the growing reality of mass violence in the United States, particularly gun violence. However, caregivers and school personnel *have a responsibility* to help children and youth feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security, reinforcing their natural resilience, and talking with them about their fears.

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Remind them that you and other adults are there to protect them. Emphasize that schools are generally very safe, even though the news may contribute to the perception that they are not. Indeed, research is clear that schools are among the safest places for children and that the likelihood that any individual child will experience violence at school is very low.
2. **Validate children's feelings.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately. If appropriate for the child, acknowledge that the prevalence of mass violence in this country is disturbing and unacceptable, and that many adults are working to address the problem.
3. **Make time to talk.** Let children's questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.
4. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
    a. *Early elementary school* children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
    b. *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. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
    c. *Upper middle school and high school* students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize that adults are responsible for keeping students safe but that they can have a role in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g., not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to school safety made by students or community members), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for their mental health needs.
5. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school, in the community, and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.
6. **Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most

© 2023 National Association of School Psychologists | 4340 East West Hwy, Bethesda, MD 20814 | www.nasponline.org | 301-657-0270

children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, who suffer from depression or other mental illness, or who have special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

7. **Limit access to television and social media attention to these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.
8. **Correct misinformation.** Speculating or spreading rumors about the specifics of a violent event can unnecessarily escalate anxiety and fear. Emphasize that law enforcement and other designated authorities have the most accurate information. Counter misconceptions that people with mental illness are more inclined toward violence. This isn't true. In fact, people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators. Experts, including the FBI, emphasize that it takes a combination of multiple, often cascading, factors to lead someone to violence.
9. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promotes physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed. Support healthy social connections.
10. **Talk about steps children and youth can take to make a positive difference.** The ability to take action, even in small ways, can help reduce anxiety and promote resilience. Help children and youth identify organizations they can support or things they can do either related to violence prevention or simply to make a positive contribution to their family, school, or broader community.

SUGGESTED POINTS TO EMPHASIZE WHEN TALKING TO CHILDREN

- Schools are safe places. School staff work with families and public safety providers (such as local police and fire departments, emergency responders, and hospitals) to keep you safe.
- Our school building is safe because … (cite specific school procedures).
- Adults are responsible for keeping you safe, but we can all play a role in school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous, or frightened.
- There is a difference between reporting and ratting, tattling, or gossiping. You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the ***possibility*** of something happening and the ***probability*** that it will affect you (or our school community) directly. Even though any act of mass violence is horrible and unacceptable, the statistical likelihood of experiencing such violence in school is low. Based on data from the 2020–2021 school year, any given school might experience a shooting with casualties about once every 1,400 years. For perspective, 1,400 years ago was 623 A.D. Furthermore, the chance of getting injured or killed at school is about 1 in 450,000 (or .0000022%), with less than 3% of youth homicides of any kind occurring at school.
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things we enjoy, sticking to our normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and help keep us from worrying about the event.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, be under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffer from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.

© 2023 National Association of School Psychologists | 4340 East West Hwy, Bethesda, MD 20814 | www.nasponline.org | 301-657-0270

- Stay away from guns and other weapons unless under adult supervision with the proper training. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is the leading risk factor for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in antiviolence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from adults if they are or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.

Please cite this document as: National Association of School Psychologists. (2023). *Talking to children about violence* [Handout].

© 2023 National Association of School Psychologists

SCHOOL SAFETY AND CRISIS

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT VIOLENCE: TIPS FOR FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

Families and school personnel play a critical role in helping to reestablish a sense of normalcy and security for children after an act of violence occurs. Follow these key reminders and visit www.nasponline.org/children-and-violence to learn more.

REASSURE CHILDREN

- Reassure children you are there to keep them safe.
- Make time for children to talk about and learn to appropriately express their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs and help to put them in perspective.
- Emphasize what schools and caregivers are doing to keep people safe. Point out clear or visible safety efforts whenever possible.
- Explain that, although the possibility of school violence exists, the probability that it will affect us (our school) is very low. Most schools are safe, even though it may not feel that way in the moment.
- Be aware of how your emotions/reactions could contribute to fear/trauma in some children. It's okay to acknowledge your own fear/concern, but prioritize calmness in the presence of children.

MAKE TIME TO TALK

- Be patient and look for clues that a child wants to talk, such as hovering around.
- Let children's questions guide the information provided.
- If a child is fearful/worried/confused, listen and acknowledge (e.g., "This is really hard to understand."). Use statements like "Let's talk about what we are doing at school/home to keep us safe (provide 2-3 visible or clear examples)." This is not a guarantee of safety; rather, it is reassurance adults are doing everything they can to support safety.
- Young children may need concrete activities such as looking at books, while some older children may prefer writing, drawing, or playing music to identify and express their feelings.
- Be mindful of a child's previous traumas or exposure to violence and chronic or systemic stressors in their life.

REVIEW SAFETY PROCEDURES

- Help children identify an adult at school and in the community that they can go to if they feel uncomfortable, threatened, or at risk.
- Review procedures and safeguards in school and at home. Be sure children understand the information.

OBSERVE CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL STATE

- Watch for changes in behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns that can indicate anxiety or stress. Some examples include irritability, nightmares, and stomachaches. These should ease with reassurance and time.
- Seek help from a mental health professional right away if you are concerned about your child hurting themselves or someone else. Also seek help if they have more intense reactions such as excessive fear or anger that lasts more than 2 weeks.
- Limit television viewing and social media that may have disturbing images or graphic references to the event.

© 2022 National Association of School Psychologists

SCHOOL SAFETY AND CRISIS

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT VIOLENCE: TIPS FOR FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

KEEP EXPLANATIONS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Communications should be tailored to the specific needs, age, and developmental level of each child. Balancing the amount of detail provided with reassurances is important at any age.

Early Elementary

Answer questions simply, without extensive details; balance with reassurances that they and their loved ones are safe and protected.

Upper Elementary and Early Middle School

Provide factual information to correct misinformation. Help them separate reality from fantasy. Invite students to share their thoughts and offer alternatives of expression, such as play acting or drawing.

Upper Middle and High School

Listen to students' ideas and observations about current safety efforts. Emphasize why and how to follow school safety guidelines (e.g., not opening exterior doors), report concerns, and get help. As needed, assist students with safe and prosocial advocacy and involvement.

POINTS TO EMPHASIZE WHEN TALKING TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- What happened is scary and sad, but most schools are quite safe. In our community, school staff are working with families and public safety providers to keep you safe.
- The school building is safe because … (cite specific school procedures).
- School safety is primarily the responsibility of adults, but we can all play a role. Tell an adult if you see or hear something that concerns you. You may provide important information that can prevent harm.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. Adults work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry. You can always tell … (provide specific example).
- Stay away from guns and other weapons unless supervised by an adult. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution. Students can be part of antiviolence programs at school, learn conflict mediation skills, and seek help from an adult if they are (or if a peer is) struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

For Information about continuing to support children in coping with tragedy, see Guidance at a Glance: "Helping Children Cope With Tragedy"

NASP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF School Psychologists

Follow these key reminders and visit www.nasponline.org/children-and-violence to learn more.

For additional guidance, visit www.nasponline.org/safety-and-crisis.

www.nasponline.org

© 2022 National Association of School Psychologists