

# Talking with Kids About News

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## How to Help Kids Feel Safe After Tragedy

By Grace Hwang Lynch

In the days and weeks following a high-profile tragedy, kids may have a lot of questions about whether something like this could happen to them. In fact, parents themselves may have a lot of worries about the safety of raising children in this world. It's normal for both adults and kids to feel anxious after such a publicly devastating event, but there are things you can do to minimize the stress and maintain a sense of normalcy.



Here are some tips from psychologists.

**It's Normal to Be Concerned.** Youngsters who have heard or seen news reports about disturbing events may be reluctant to return to the classroom and other public spaces. Moms and dads may even feel anxious about dropping their kids off at day care or school, after hearing about tragedies that happen to children. "Parents are following instincts to be alarmed and to be fearful," says nationally certified school psychologist Eric Rossen, Ph.D. But Rossen stresses that we need to remember these are isolated incidents. "It's important to continue to remember that this is such a rare event, statistically and objectively speaking. It's hard to bear because it's so rare."

**Take a News Break.** While you may be interested in watching twenty-four-hour news for all the latest developments, your children may not be able to handle that. The American Psychological Association recommends limiting the amount of time spent watching news reports, as constant exposure may actually heighten their anxiety and fears.

**Answer Kids' Questions – Without Giving Them Unnecessary Details.** Even if you limit news exposure in your home, chances are your kids may hear details—accurate or not—on the playground. When they return to school after a national tragedy, it's a good idea to ask what they've heard.

"A lot of times, children misunderstand what's happening," says Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D., author of "Smart Parenting for Smart Kids." "For example, if they saw a picture of men carrying guns, it looked like there was a lot of them. Let them know the gunman is not in our backyard. This is not something that's happening at many different schools."

And if kids have questions, Rossen says the key is to answer—not avoid—them without giving too much information. For example, you might explain the Connecticut shootings to a school-age child like this: "Someone went into a school and they hurt a lot of people. But we know that your school is safe, and you're safe in your home."

**Maintain a Regular Schedule.** While it may be tempting to keep your kids close to your side after a devastating event, child psychologists agree that sticking to a regular routine helps kids to get past their distress. "By bringing our children to school, we are communicating a very important message about courage and resilience, about going on despite terrible things that happen," says Kennedy-Moore. For preschoolers, talk them through their day using very concrete examples, such as, "You're going to be with Mrs. Smith, and she's going to be in charge of you. Daddy's going to get back at lunch, and we'll go to the playground."

**Pay Extra Attention to Your Kids.** When you are at home with your children, make sure to be engaged with them. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends that parents focus on their children during the week following a tragedy, including spending some extra time reading or playing with kids before bed, to foster a sense of closeness and security.

**Model Confidence and Assurance.** Don't forget that you are your child's role model during times of stress. Kennedy-Moore explains, "Children look to their parents to see how scared they should be." Of course, if you are feeling anxious, make time to address your own needs, such as talking to friends or family or seeking guidance from religious leaders or counselors.

**Find Solace or Take Action.** Even children can feel better by doing something, whether it's a spiritual pursuit, a political activity or just an act of kindness. Look for activities that are age-appropriate. "Find a child-sized way to take action," says Kennedy-Moore, "saying a prayer together, or raising money, or signing a petition, or sending a card or letter."

**Signs of More Than Normal Stress.** Watch for signs of excessive fear or anxiety in the next few weeks. According to the American Psychological Association, signs of stress in children can include trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating on school work, or changes in appetite. If those symptoms last for more than a week or two, ask your child's teachers if they are observing the same thing and consult your school psychologist or pediatrician.

**Focus on the Positive.** Experts, from psychologists to religious leaders, remind us to focus on the good. For starters, remember how unusual these tragedies are. "Statistically speaking, it's safer for them to be in a school than for a parent to put them in a car," says Rossen.

Tough times can be a reminder for us to cherish our family and loved ones each day. Kennedy-Moore reminds us, "There is more joy than sorrow in life."

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Susanne • 2 years ago
This is a thoughtful article as as adults go about their lives, they may not realise that children are processing the world with little experiences to handle the devastating news of terrorism. They are afraid. Story (when it is not didactic) is such an effective way to emotionally engage young people and enter a narrative with parents where the child can ask and discuss what is happening and pathways to processing it safely. I write books for young people which I hope does that. There are many wonderful books for all ages that create a safe place for discussion.
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DMM • 3 years ago
Thank you for this post. Here's another great article about how to talk to your children about tragedy, featuring David Schonfeld (director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement): http://www.bu.edu/cas/magaz...
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virginia k. anderson • 5 years ago
This is a wonderfully expressed prost, and much needed too. I know that my grandsons (aged 9 and 10) have cried a lot and didn't want to go back to school. My daughter lovingly talked with them, educating them on how to take steps for these unexpected happenings. -Virginia
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