

How to talk to kids after incidents of mass violence

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Kids often hear about high profile incidents of violence from their peers. And if they don't, they often know something's up because they notice the adults in their lives are upset, even when we think we've hidden our feelings.

It's okay to not have answers for kids, but choosing silence can be very problematic and scary for them. This is because the narratives that kids, especially young kids, make up to make sense of what is happening can lead to wrong conclusions and sometimes even greater fear and anxiety than a conversation about the truth with a trusted adult.

1. Limit their access to news, especially for younger kids.

The news can include traumatic images and unfiltered content that are often too much, even for adults.

2. Check in with our own reactions and emotions.

As caregivers, we must regulate and anchor our own emotions first and foremost so that we don't unintentionally transfer them to our children. Even if we don't tell kids what we're feeling, children of all ages are very good at picking up caregivers' energy and non-verbal communication as signals for how they should feel or think about a given situation. Be sure to "secure your oxygen mask first" and get whatever support you need from other adults.

3. Ask your child what, if anything, they have heard.

Even if some parents/caregivers choose not to share specific events, school children will likely pick up something from their peers. The older the child, the greater the likelihood this will happen. So not checking in is NOT the answer, especially if you have school age children. Offer a supportive and non-judgmental space so that your child can openly share their thoughts, feelings, and also ask questions.

1. Limit their access to news, especially for younger kids.
2. Check in with our own reactions and emotions.
3. Ask your child what, if anything, they have heard.
4. If your child has heard something and/or if you decide to talk openly about a traumatic event, keep it bite-sized and digestible.
5. Regularly check in with your child.
6. Many of us feel helpless in the face of senseless violence: it's important to normalize that feeling with your child but also help them regain their sense of agency.

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4. If your child has heard something and/or if you decide to talk openly about a traumatic event, keep it bite-sized and digestible.

As a general rule of thumb, the younger the child, the less detail you need to give. Keep it simple such as: "Something really bad happened." "Things are under control now." "All the adults are working hard to keep everyone safe." "Yes, it's so sad that sometimes bad things happen to good people." "Yes, it's really hard to understand." "I feel really sad too."

Also notice any changes to your child's mood, behavior, habits, etc. It is not uncommon to see normal regression such as some children becoming more clingy.



5. Regularly check in with your child.

Often, one conversation may not be enough. This is especially the case for older children who might hear more information as the details of the tragedy continue to come to light in the coming days. Gently, without pressure, ask your child what they have heard, what they are thinking and feeling. Also notice any changes to your child's mood, behavior, habits, etc. It is not uncommon to see normal regression such as some children becoming more clingy. This is normal. Reassure yourself and your child about this: "Seems like you need extra hugs and snuggles. Totally makes sense. Let me know if you need anything else." As caregivers, we want to cultivate a healthy dynamic in which our children can reach out to us for a sense of safety and refuge whenever they need and throughout their childhood.

6. Many of us feel helpless in the face of senseless violence: it's important to normalize that feeling with your child but also help them regain their sense of agency.

For example, focus on things within their control. They have agency to express their feelings, to take care of themselves, to express their needs. They may want extra hugs, extra time with things that bring them joy and calm (e.g., drawing, writing, cooking, family time, etc.). For older kids they might want to take action in the larger community. You can support them by helping them find developmentally appropriate avenues to foster and support their advocacy.

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