

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.

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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"](#)