



Talking with Children after Mass Violence



All of us - children, caregivers, and communities – are struggling to make sense of another unfathomable act of violence. When these devastating events unfold, we can feel overwhelmed and at a loss for how to take care of ourselves and our children. Children and youth can be particularly impacted or frightened by news of violence in schools. As parents, caregivers, and community leaders, we can support children and youth as they cope. The points below are designed to support you as you navigate this time with your loved ones.

A first and very important step before talking with children about challenging events is to **take space to be with your own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and reactions**.

Children are keenly aware of their caregivers' emotions and worries.

Giving yourself time to process models that important behavior for your child.

It also allows you to check in with yourself: If you are too upset, anxious or worried about troubling current events, wait to talk with your child or ask someone else who is close to them to do so.

**Make room for discussion.** Even young children are likely to be aware of highly publicized events. It is important that caregivers take time to talk with children about what has happened. Share limited information – only what is necessary. When in doubt, start with simple, honest explanations.

**Invite questions, listen, and validate.** Letting children ask questions is one of the best ways to assess their understanding. Caregivers do not need to have answers to every question. What is more important is creating an open dialogue with your child where their thoughts and feelings can be heard and validated.

**Maintain routines.** Children thrive when they have a sense of structure. Although it can be tempting to break from routines during stressful times, it is stabilizing for children to have a sense of predictability.

**Pay attention to all forms of communication.** Caregivers learn a lot through their child's behavior, play, and nonverbal cues. Notice any differences in their behavior or play. Children may be more irritable, have difficulty focusing, or seem more "checked out." For young children, their play may be a way they express feelings or curiosities about recent events.

**Limit exposure to news and media.** Media exposure can overwhelm children with graphic images and words. Additionally, some children may not be able to distinguish between the present and what has already happened, leading them to believe that violence is ongoing.

**Understand the range of responses.** Some children may have intense feelings or reactions. Others may have a very limited reaction. This range is normal – we all process these events differently. Pay attention to changes in your child's daily activities like changes to their sleep or their appetite. If you are concerned about lasting or drastic changes, reach out for support.

**Reach out for support.** These events, by their very nature, overwhelm our ability to cope. It is especially important to access the people, communities, traditions, and belief systems that are important to your family during challenging times.

If you feel that your child needs additional support, please contact The Child Witness to Violence Project at 617.414.4244

www.childwitnesstoviolence.org