

# Talking to Children

## When Scary Things Happen

CENTER FOR  
RESILIENCE + WELL-BEING  
IN SCHOOLS



When scary or violent things happen in the world, whether thousands of miles away, in your state, your town, or your home, youth look to the adults that surround them to help them feel safe and understand what is happening. This can feel tricky and challenging, particularly when the adults are also responding to and making sense of the same experience. Safe and supportive adults are the best predictor of resilience in youth. This resource offers guidance to help you talk with children and youth after something scary or violent happens.

### CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF, FIRST

Before talking with a youth, check in with yourself (How am I feeling? What do I need?) so that you are calm and grounded during the conversation. Just as youth have feelings about these experiences, so do adults. You might feel scared, worried, overwhelmed, angry, helpless, sad, and/or concerned. You might feel distracted, scattered, confused, or even numb. These feelings, in both adults and youth, are completely normal following a traumatic experience.



A helpful first step may be to simply acknowledge the feelings you are having.

The simple act of labeling emotions promotes a sense of calm. It shifts brain activity from the alarm centers of the brain to the parts of our brain that support coping and problem solving. You can also take a few deep breaths, a short walk, talk to a friend, or do anything that helps you feel calm or more grounded. This will help prepare you to talk with youth in a way that communicates safety, protection, and openness to talking about their feelings and experience. Checking in with yourself first will also help you to be ready to address any questions youth might have. It's okay not to have all the answers.



Your warm, open presence is the most important thing.

### CLARIFY YOUR GOAL



As you approach the conversation, it can be helpful to start with a goal in mind. An overall goal is to create a safe space for youth to share their feelings, questions, reactions, and experience about the scary/sad thing and to feel your support. You might ask yourself, "How might I help my child feel safe? Is there some important information for them to know? Is there any misinformation to correct? What might my child already know or think about the situation?"



Keep coming back to messages of safety, support, and willingness to keep talking.

### PROVIDE INFORMATION



Share simple facts and information about what happened and balance it with information about how adults and/or community systems may have stepped forward to help and create safety. Match the type and amount of information to the developmental level of the youth. Ask open-ended questions about what they may have already heard and correct any misinformation. Keep this part of the discussion brief, simple, and clear. Multiple short conversations can often be more powerful than a single long conversation.



Remember to share child-size information and keep checking in.

### REFLECT



Reflection involves simply repeating back the youth's words verbatim or summarizing what the youth said. Reflection lets youth know you are listening and tracking what they are sharing. When you reflect, it is important to use their own words as much as possible.



Reflection communicates that you are listening and what they are saying is important.





## ASK HELPFUL QUESTIONS



Ask helpful questions to learn more about the young person's thoughts, feelings, perspective, and needs. The goal is to gain an understanding of the young person's experience and NOT one of "fact finding," or learning about specific details of a situation. The questions we ask should be open-ended and focused on their experience, emotion and perspective. ("What was that like for you?," "How are you feeling?," "What are you thinking/wondering about?," "Do you have any questions or worries?").



Helpful questions encourage open sharing and help you learn more about a youth's feelings and needs.

---

## GO SLOW, PAUSE, AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE



Young people need a little time to respond after adults ask them questions. This is valuable time for processing emotions and coordinating thinking, especially as it relates to complex emotional situations. Make sure your body language conveys patience, openness and care.



When you pause and allow time, you communicate "I have time for you," and "you are important".

---

## LABEL EMOTIONS



Just as it is helpful for us as adults to label emotions, it is also helpful for youth to label how they are feeling. Sometimes they need support to do this. You can help youth to label emotions by reflecting back any feeling words they say, naming feelings you notice, and taking a guess at what they are feeling. When you do this, check in with the young person to see if you got it right.



Labeling emotions supports emotion awareness and regulation.

---

## VALIDATE AND NORMALIZE



Step into their shoes and let the youth know that you understand what they are feeling and it makes sense to feel or think that way. You might say, "that makes sense," "I get it," "I understand," "other people feel that way too," and "you are not alone".



Validating and normalizing helps youth feel understood and trust their own perspectives and feelings.

---

## REDUCE MEDIA EXPOSURE



Be aware of how much you are checking the media when you are with youth and be aware of how much they are tracking the event in the media to monitor and reduce. Remember, that while it is part of our culture to be consistently connected to media, if youth see that you are checking your phone or the television constantly, they may be more likely to do the same, and increase their anxiety and nerves.



Information in small, developmentally appropriate chunks is best for youth and the adults who support them.



Program for Prevention Science  
University of Colorado at Boulder  
Boulder, Colorado 80309  
Visit our Website:  
<https://ibsweb.colorado.edu/crw/>  
Email: [crw@colorado.edu](mailto:crw@colorado.edu)