



How to Talk to Youth About Traumatic Events

When a mass tragedy strikes, it can be natural to want to protect the children in our life by shielding them from the event entirely. This can be helpful for children six and under, but elementary school-aged youth often hear about events at school. If children get information from their peers, they might not understand the whole picture, and their anxiety could be heightened. By avoiding the topic with youth, we inadvertently and silently pass on the message that scary things should not be discussed. Try to be open to the conversation if youth want to talk about what they heard, and sometimes you may need to start the conversation. Here are some tips to guide you in open communication with your child:

- Answer questions as honestly as possible, in an age appropriate way. Acknowledge that you may not have all the information or answers but correct any inaccurate information they may have received.
- Reassure their immediate safety without giving false promises. It's important for youth to hear "I am here to protect you," or "We are safe right now," even if they don't verbalize that they are scared.
- Ask about and validate their feelings, whatever they are. Remind them that there is no such thing as a "bad" thought or feeling – only safe and unsafe choices.
- You can share your feelings with them your child, and how you can use healthy coping skills together to get through this. Examples of healthy coping skills are deep breathing, talking to caring people we trust, visualizing relaxing places, repeating affirmations, exercising, listening to music, reading, and/or going to therapy.
- Provide comfort such as hugs, snuggles, or comfort items like a favorite stuffed animal or fidget toy.
- Reduce your child's exposure to the media as much as possible. Media outlets can sensationalize tragedies, which can be triggering for both youth and adults.
- If children ask, "What if the same thing happens here?" talk about a safety plan and create one as a family. This can include talking through cell phone/smart watch usage, identifying safe places, etc. Much like developing a safety plan in the event of other emergencies, such as house fires, planning can provide comfort to your child.

Pay It Forward

If children feel helpless and want to act, encourage them to find a way to help and make a difference, including:

- Writing get well cards to survivors and thank you cards to first responders
- Collecting items or money to donate
- Writing to legislators about gun laws
- Holding a small fundraiser like a car wash or bake sale in the community to raise funds to send.



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