



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 your child may have received.
- **Reassure your child’s 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 your child’s feelings, whatever they are.** Remind them that there is no such thing as a “bad” thought or feeling: only safe and unsafe choices.
- **Share your feelings — and healthy coping skills — with your child.** Some healthy coping skills include deep breathing, talking to caring people we trust, visualizing relaxing places, repeating affirmations, exercising, listening to music, reading, and going to therapy.
- **Provide comfort.** Hug and cuddle your child, or ensure they can access comfort items such as a favorite stuffed animal or a sensory toy.
- **Reduce your child’s exposure to TV, radio, and online media as much as possible.** Media outlets can sensationalize tragedies, which can trigger both youth and adults.
- **Create a family safety plan.** If children ask “*What if the same thing happens here?*” talk about a safety plan and create one together. This can include talking through a cell phone or smart watches, identifying safe places, or creating go bags. Much like developing a safety plan in the event of emergencies such as house fires, planning can provide comfort to your child.

If children want to do something in support after a mass tragedy, encourage them to find a way to make a difference:

- Write get-well cards to survivors and thank you cards to first responders
- Collect items or money to donate to relief efforts
- Write to local, state, and national lawmakers
- Hold a small fundraiser in the community to raise funds for relief efforts

Learn more about Uplift’s services

Uplift’s **Philly HopeLine** is a free, confidential helpline staffed by our Master’s level clinicians. The Philly HopeLine is open to all youth and caregivers in the Philadelphia region. Call if you’d like to sign up for grief groups, receive emotional or grief support, identify community resources, or get on the list for an in-school grief group. Interpretation service is available for more than 100 languages. Dial **833-PHL-HOPE (833-745-4673)** to speak to an Uplift clinician, or email PHLHope@UpliftPhilly.org.

A tip sheet from

Uplift Center for Grieving Children

Office: 267-437-3123

Philly HopeLine: 833-745-4673

www.UpliftPhilly.org

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