



WAYS TO TALK TO CHILDREN

Addressing School Shootings

Tips to Promote Child Well-Being and Resilience



A Heartbreaking Topic

Trying to make sense of the horror that is a school shooting feels difficult to comprehend or put into words. Attempting to explain it to young children and provide the assurances that they need may seem overwhelming and challenging.

We hope this resource provides some guidance.

Initiating the Conversation

- **Talk about it.** Start the conversation. It never feels like the perfect moment to speak about something of this nature, perhaps start by acknowledging that very feeling.
- **Reassure your child** that it's okay to speak about things that are overwhelming, sad, or scary. Validate and normalize their emotions.
- Follow your **child's lead** as to the flow of the conversation.
- Be **accepting**, provide unconditional positive regard, and patience.
- **Model calm** reactions.
- **Ask open-ended questions** to establish what your child knows or has heard.
- **Provide factual, developmentally-appropriate information.**
- Support your child as he/she **expresses feelings** and thoughts.
- Encourage your child to **ask questions** if he/she doesn't understand.
- **Limit media exposure** – for you and your child.
- **Monitor for signs of distress** that indicate the need for professional support.
- Help your child **understand his/her emotions** and yours. Naming them is a great way to start identifying, discussing, and processing them. Shared emotions also help to normalize emotional reactions and create opportunities for bonding and sharing.
- **Reassure your child of his/her safety.** Provide evidence to support this statement like reviewing safety procedures. Remind them that there are plans in place to keep them safe and that there are adults in their life who will help protect them.
- **Address inaccurate concerns** – for example: school shootings happen daily; children are not safe at school; all people are bad.
- Provide information and evidence that **contradicts anxious beliefs** – for example, the thought that the same situation could happen at your child's school. Use a map to show distance, a visual to demonstrate safe people within the school, review emergency situations and the actions that are practiced by the child at school according to their policy.

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping. To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.'" - Mr. Rogers

Initiating the Conversation continued...

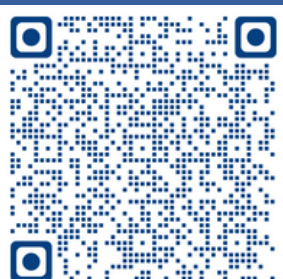
- Know that it's okay to **admit not understanding** the situation fully yourself. This normalizes that understanding this may be overwhelming – reinforce that you'll navigate and work through it together.
- **Discuss grief, loss, and death** in factual, developmentally appropriate ways if the child expresses concerns regarding these. Avoid using euphemisms as those are abstract and can create irrational fears. For example, "death means going to sleep" can create night time fear, sleep resistance, and other concerns. Be direct, sensitive and age-appropriate when providing an explanation.
- **Encourage other means of expression** – drawings, puppets, role-play – to assist your child in his/her own processing. You can use child-centered prompts, for example, "**I wonder if we can draw how we feel when we think about that**".
- Identify the **child's support systems** in different environments. Create visuals, like drawn pictures or photographs, or lists with names and numbers.
- Talk about the **people who provide help** and support. Those who advocate for change, those who lead in efforts to protect, those who provide first aid and relief - **the helpers**.
- Involve the child in **efforts to provide support**. Fundraising, advocacy campaigns, writing letters, or cards.
- **Rely on your routine**. Consistency and predictability are crucial ways to buffer anxiety and create the feeling of safety.
- **Physical affection** and comfort provide safety and security.
- Find ways to **practice self-care**. Both for you as a parent/caregiver and for the child to assist in regulation.
- Seek **professional help and support** from mental health therapists.

Examples of Open-Ended Questions

- What do you think about that?
- What is that like for you?
- How does that feel?
- What feelings are in your head, heart, and body when you think about that?
- Where are those feelings inside your body?
- What can I do to help you? What do you need to talk? a hug? some time together?
- Who can you ask for help at school? And at home?
- What worries do you have?
- How can I support you?
- Who can you talk to about your feelings?
- What can we do to help others?
- How can we ask for some time to calm our feelings and feel better?

Parent/Caregiver Self-Care

- Acknowledge your **own emotional response** to the situation.
- **Express your feelings** to your support system.
- Allow yourself the **time to process** shock and grief.
- Continue your usual **daily routine** to reduce your anxious response
- **Prioritize exercise and healthy eating** to maintain wellbeing. Avoid alcohol and tobacco as much as possible.
- Practice healthy **emotion expression** – keeping a journal is a great resource.
- Encourage **quality time as a family** for conversations, check-ins, and regulation.
- **Seek professional support** by initiating mental health counseling services



Scan for Resources



www.centerforchildcounseling.org

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