

Talking to Your Child About School Violence

As parents, it's natural for us to worry about our children. We try our best to help them over life's hurdles and protect them from the dangers of the world. When the time comes to send them off to school, we trust that we're leaving them in safe and capable hands. However, certain events are out of our control. Occasionally, a rare act of school violence is committed, shattering that trust and upending our sense of security. It's important to give our children support as we all work to come to terms with such a devastating event.

While school violence can include anything from bullying to damaging school property, the horrific nature of school shootings, and the injuries and fatalities that result, make them headline news. After a school shooting, emotional images and stories of terror quickly take over the media. Our children are likely to be exposed to it on some level.

After an instance of school violence occurs, children can experience a variety of reactions. While some children aren't affected at all, others experience intense fear that a similar situation will happen to them. This fear can become so overwhelming that it significantly impacts their behavior and performance.

After a traumatic event, such as a school shooting, it's important to talk to your child about any feelings they are experiencing. Following are some tips on how to open up the lines of communication with your child.

Tips for talking to your child

- **Encourage open and honest communication.**
Ask your child what they have heard as a place to start. Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings. Listen to them without rushing to try to make it better. In some cases their fears may seem unfounded to you, but know that they are very real for them. Let your child know that having worries or strong feelings about what happened is normal. Make sure that your child knows they can approach you or other trusted adults, such as a teacher, should they feel anxious or that their safety is threatened.
- **Answer your child's questions honestly.**
Be straightforward with your answers, and base them on your child's age and ability to understand. Don't lie to your child by telling them that it's not a possibility that something like this can happen in their community. Instead, let them know it's not common for things like this to happen – this is the reason why certain events receive such a large amount of media attention. Keep in mind that your child may need to hear your answers repeatedly in order to feel somewhat reassured.

- **Reassure your child of their safety.** However, make sure to be realistic and truthful. Let them know that you will always do your best to keep them safe. Talk about the people in their community (for example, parents, police officials and teachers) who are there to help protect them.
- **Reestablish a routine as quickly as possible.** If your child's normal routine has been disrupted, it will help them to feel more secure. Keeping your child home from school in an attempt to reduce anxiety will only increase fear when it's time to return.
- **Provide comfort.** Physical closeness can help to restore a sense of safety and security. Give them your undivided attention and extra hugs.
- **Help your child identify and express feelings at their own pace.** Invite them to talk by asking questions such as "Do you feel safe at your school?" Don't force them to talk about it if they aren't ready or if they aren't interested.
- **Share your feelings with your child as appropriate.** Let them know that something like this also makes adults worried, scared and sad. But stay in control of your emotions. Children watch us to understand how to process what is happening. Acknowledging natural emotions, but also sharing ideas for how to manage them gives a child tools to feel better.
- **Limit your child's exposure to the media.** Young children do not understand that replays of news events are not happening at the moment. As a result, they often respond as if the event were happening all over again each time they are exposed to it. Be prepared to talk with older children about the event.

Be aware of stress signs

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we are not as successful at helping our children as we may like. If your child seems to be severely affected, or is struggling to deal with their feelings, contact a mental health professional. Following are some signs that your child might be struggling to deal with an issue.

- Overly emotional reactions (such as crying, moodiness, and irritability)
- Physical complaints (such as stomachaches or headaches)
- Appetite changes
- Difficulty getting along with others
- Not wanting to go to school
- Poor performance in school
- Behavioral problems
- Increased or new fears (such as a fear for their own safety)
- Sleep disruptions; nightmares
- Excessive clinginess
- Withdrawal from family or friends

We cannot control all of the events that will occur in children's lives. However, we can provide our children with the tools necessary to successfully cope when tragedy strikes. By doing so, we can minimize their fears, increase their confidence, and prepare them for the challenges life brings.