How to Talk to Your Kids About a Tragedy

As parents, it’s natural to want to protect your children, even from what they see on the news. When traumatic and violent events happen, like school shootings, mass shootings or terrorist events, there’s no easy way to talk to your children about this type of violence. But it’s important to have those talks, says Suzanne Silverstein, founding director of Cedars-Sinai’s Psychological Trauma Center and Share & Care program and an expert in psychological trauma.

“It’s our job to talk to our children honestly and sensitively about what they’ve seen and heard when tragic events happen. It’s also important to remind them of all the measures that are in place to keep them safe.”

How To Help Children Process A Tragedy

Limit screen time. While you cannot entirely shield kids of any age from upsetting news, you can limit their exposure to it within your own home. Tuning into round-the-clock news coverage can overexpose children to traumatic images and reports that are confusing and even frightening. (Too much of this isn’t great for adults, either.)

“Seeing the same thing on television over and over can give young children a sense that it’s happening numerous times with no end,” Silverstein says.

Social media feeds filled with videos and news stories about a shooting or other tragedy can cause strong emotions—so emphasize with older children the importance of balancing their desire to be well-informed with good self-care.
Listen to your child's feelings and validate them. Let your children talk to you about their feelings, fears and worries following traumatic events. Validate that being scared is an understandable response, and reassure them that right now they are safe.

Tailor your responses to your child’s age. There’s no one-size-fits-all approach to handling tough topics.

- **PRESCHOOL AGE:**
  For children in preschool, it’s easier to control what they see and hear. Consider not bringing up a recent scary event unless they ask about it first. Assure them that if they have questions, you are available to answer them.

- **ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE:**
  At this age, they’re likely to hear about events like this at school, and it’s wise to have a pre-emptive conversation with them. Provide basic, factual information and let them ask you questions. Skip graphic details and focus on their concerns.

- **MIDDLE SCHOOL & HIGH SCHOOL AGE:**
  A more detailed discussion will be appropriate. Ask them what they’ve heard and what they think about it. Give them a chance to discuss their fears and feelings.

Answer their questions honestly, even if it means saying, “I don’t know.” There are lots of questions in the aftermath of traumatic events, and often few satisfying answers. It’s OK to admit that you don’t know an answer to a question, or that you will have to think about their questions further.

“Thank your children for their trust in you, and for coming to you with their questions,” Silverstein says. “Reassure them every chance you get that you are always available to listen to them and to answer their questions.”

**Give them extra time and attention.** Prioritize family time. Allow plenty of time to talk to them and play with them. Engage in activities you enjoy as a family.

**Maintain your good habits.** Keeping meals on track, getting plenty of rest, making time for physical activity, and remind your children that you love them and you’re there for them are always important.

**Keep an eye on your own behavior.** “Our children look to us to see how to react to situations,” Silverstein says. “If we do a good job taking care of ourselves and managing our emotions, our children learn from that.” Show compassion and sensitivity to those affected by the crisis; model the kind of behavior you want to see in your children.

**Reinforce kindness.** This is a good time to remind your children to do something kind for another person. “Kindness outweighs bad actions,” she says.

“Information travels more quickly than ever, and as adults and parents, it’s our job to talk to our children honestly and sensitively about what they’ve seen and heard when tragic events happen,” says Silverstein. “It’s important we talk to them in a manner that is honest, sensitive and age-appropriate.”

Your child wants to hear about these tragic events from you, not on the school yard.