

Talking with Children About Tragedy in the News

- **First, find out what your child or student knows about the event.** Even if you haven't yet discussed it together, the child may have heard the news from media sources or classmates. The child's perception of what has happened may be very different from the reality.
- **Reassure the child that it is ok to talk about sad or scary events.** It is also ok to admit to feeling sad, scared, or angry and to acknowledge that you are having those feelings too. In an interview with *Good Morning America*, expert Willow Bay advises, "Establish that there is no question too scary for your child to talk about." Likewise, Mr. Rogers writes, "If we don't let children know it's okay to feel sad and scared, they may think something is wrong with them when they do feel that way."
- **Encourage questions, both now and in the future.** David Schonfeld, MD, writes, "Like adults, children are better able to cope with a crisis if they feel they understand it. Question-and-answer exchanges provide you with the opportunity to offer support as your child begins to understand the crisis and the response to it."
- **Reassure the child that he or she is safe.** When a child has questions such as, "Why did this happen?" or "Am I safe?", explain that events like these are very rare. Ms. Bay also encourages parents to talk about the many people who work every day to keep kids safe, such as police officers, teachers, or the school principal.
- **In sharing information, be honest, but be mindful of the child's age.** The National Association of School Psychologists offers these helpful guidelines in its tips for [talking with children about violence](#) (available in [multiple languages](#) below):
 - **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
 - **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
 - **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community

members, etc.), communicating any personal safety to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.

- **Remember that it is ok to admit that you don't have all of the answers.** Mr. Rogers offers the following: "If the answer is 'I don't know,' then the simplest reply might be something like, 'I'm sad about the news, and I'm worried. But I love you, and I'm here to care for you.'"
- **Be patient.** If the child doesn't have much to say yet, give him some time and let him know he can come back with more questions or to talk about the events when he is ready. If he shows signs of depression and anxiety over time, speak with the child's pediatrician or a school counselor for guidance.