

Can We Talk for a Minute?

Conversations with Kids about Violence

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“Mommy, why do people hurt other people?” “You have taught me to love, so why is there so much hate in our world?” “I don’t want to see my family die because of shootings, can you protect me daddy?” “Why do people protect guns more than they protect families and children?” “What can I do to change this violent epidemic?”

Above are some of the questions that children and adolescents may ask as they witness the current mass shootings and strings of violence and traumatic events that have occurred in our country and in our world. For the past few years, our nation’s climate has been rocked to its core as we have witnessed an unfathomable amount of mass shootings in environments that are normally safe. Schools, churches, movie theaters, outdoor concerts and festivals, grocery stores, and other family friendly places have been attacked by terrorism, hate and violence which in turn has resulted in a higher level of uneasiness and restlessness. Our social norms and feelings of safety and security that were once commonplace have been exchanged for fear, terror and anxiety as we face acts of violence that will affect us for generations to come.

Parents and educators alike are struggling with finding appropriate ways to address the questions that have come to the forefront by our children. The tragedies are occurring so often that we have come to expect them to happen at any moment. Naturally, we want to shield our children from these tragic events and will do whatever possible to make that happen, however, realistically, it is almost impossible to do so. Even our best efforts to protect our youth from these heinous events does not mean that they are not aware or conscious of the brevity of what has taken place. The conversations are necessary, so let’s talk for a minute!

Safety and Comfort is Key: If the incident has occurred, we will be inundated with information online and on television about the situation. Because it is inevitable that children will be exposed to this information, our role is to help set a calm and safe tone before the conversation occurs. Do not feel intimidated by their questioning, just be honest and as authentic as possible. We want children to feel comfortable about expressing their concerns to us. Allow them to lead the conversation. According to the Anti-Defamation League, above all else, help children feel safe, reassured and comforted.

Address the Obvious: We cannot ignore the events that have occurred, so we must respond accordingly. Our responses to elementary, middle school and high school students should vary as students in different levels have varying degrees of maturity and processing skills. ADL recommends that our focus with elementary students should be to give the children the time and space to express their feelings. Those feelings may include sadness, confusion,

sadness, fear, and anger. We should facilitate their expressions which could take on the form of art, play, movement, or writing. Allow those means of expression to help lead the discussion. At the middle school level, students have an acute awareness of what happened and the causes. Allow them to engage in those discussions that focus on the causes of violent and hate filled tragedies. Allow them to explore their feelings through actions such as writing letters of support, planting trees in honor, creating kindness days at school or any other positive actions that will help them learn sympathy and empathy. High school students need to be given the detailed information about the incidents. At this age, students are interested in finding ways to stop the events from occurring, they may express anger and frustration which could spark their interest in school and community activism.

We live in peculiar times, but we know that there is always hope and change. As caretakers for our children, it is important to help them believe that there is always hope in spite of the circumstances around them. Providing our children a sense of safety, stability, and a platform for self-expression, will yield positive results. In the aftermath of violence and uncertainty, our children need conversations of hope, love, peace and action.

Source: Anti-Defamation League, Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate: A Guide for Educators and Families