

Tips From Your School Psychologist

Talking to Children About Violence

High profile acts of violence, particularly in schools, can confuse and frighten children who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved-ones are at risk. They will look to adults for information and reassurance. Parents and school personnel can help children feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security and talking with them about their fears.

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
2. **Make time to talk.** Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate. Some children prefer writing, playing music, doing an art project, or even imaginative play as an outlet.
3. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they will go if they feel threatened or at risk.
4. **Observe children's emotional state.** Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. If symptoms persist or intensify despite reassurance, talk to your school psychologist, school counselor, pediatrician, or private mental health professional.
5. **Limit viewing of television coverage of a particular event.** Be aware if the television is on in common areas and what adults or older children might be watching or saying when younger children are around.
6. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking With Children About School-Related Violence

- Schools are safe places. School staff works with parents and public safety providers (local police and fire departments, emergency responders, hospitals, etc.) to keep you safe.
- The school building is safe because ... (cite specific school procedures).
- We all play a role in school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous or frightened.

- There is a difference between reporting and ratting/tattling. You can provide important information that may prevent harm by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the *possibility* of something happening and the *probability* that it will affect you (our school community).
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things that you enjoy, sticking to your normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and keep us from worrying about the event.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.
- Stay away from guns and other weapons. Tell an adult if you know that someone has a gun. Access to guns is one of the leading risk factors for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in anti-violence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from an adult if they or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

Adapted from: "Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers," National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), 2006. NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.