

Helping your children manage distress in the aftermath of a shooting

As a parent, you may be struggling with how to talk with your children about a community shooting at a school or elsewhere. It is important to remember that children look to their parents to make them feel safe. This is true no matter what ages your children are, be they toddlers, adolescents or even young adults.

Consider the following tips for helping your children manage their distress.

Talk with your child. Talking to your children about their worries and concerns is the first step to help them feel safe and begin to cope with the events occurring around them. What you talk about and how you say it does depend on their age, but all children need to be able to know you are there listening to them.

- Start the conversation. Let them know you are interested in them and want to know how they are coping with the information.
- Find times when they are most likely to talk: such as when riding in the car, before dinner or at bedtime.
- Listen to their thoughts and point of view. Don't interrupt – allow them to express their ideas and understanding before you respond.
- Listen for misinformation or misperceptions and gently correct these. Express your own opinions and ideas without putting down theirs. Acknowledge that it is okay to disagree.
- Reinforce ideas of safety and security. If you know, share what schools and communities are doing to increase safety. Remind them you are there for them to provide safety, comfort and support.

Keep home a safe place. Children, regardless of age, often find home to be a safe haven when the world around them becomes overwhelming. During times of crisis, it is important to remember that your children may come home seeking the

safe feeling they have being there. Help make it a place where your children find the peace or comfort they need. Consider planning a night where everyone participates in a favorite family activity.

Watch for signs of stress, fear or anxiety. After a traumatic event, it is typical for children (and adults) to experience a wide range of emotions, including fearfulness, shock, anger, grief and anxiety. Your children's behaviors may change because of their response to the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty with concentrating on school work or home responsibilities, changes in appetite, and changes in mood. This is normal for everyone and should begin to disappear in four to six weeks, if no other traumatic events have occurred. Encourage your children to put their feelings into words by talking about them or journaling. Some children may find it helpful to express their feelings through art, such as drawing/painting pictures, telling stories, etc.

Take "news breaks." Your children may want to keep informed by gathering information about the event from the internet, television or newspapers. It is important to limit the amount of time spent watching the news or staying connected online because constant exposure may actually heighten their anxiety and fears. Also, talk to them about what they have seen or read.

Monitor adult conversations. Be aware that your children may be listening to your conversations. If they do not understand they will "fill in the gaps," which can increase anxiety.

Check in often. Be sure to check in regularly with your children as you monitor their coping. Provide extra time, attention and patience (even an extra hug).

Take care of yourself. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children. Be a model for your children on how to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules for activities such as family meals and exercise to help restore a sense of security and normalcy. Don't over-schedule yourself to where you collapse from exhaustion; take your own breaks as well. It might only be five minutes

where you step out of the room or house and take deep breaths or a quick walk, but five minutes of slowing down can give you a little needed space. Eating right and getting enough sleep is essential for everyone-including anyone taking care of children! Remember to take breaks from your exposure to coverage of the event; allow yourself time to engage in activities you enjoy.

Help is available. These tips and strategies can help you guide your children through a current crisis. If you or your children are feeling stuck or overwhelmed, you may want to consider talking to someone who could help. A licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist can assist you and your children in developing an appropriate strategy for moving forward. It is important to [get professional help](#) if you feel like you or your children are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living at any time.

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