



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 66

Helping Your Child Feel Safe After Tragedy

Tragedies like the recent school shooting in Florida can cause very real anxiety in children, even when they are not personally affected by them. Children need and want to feel safe and protected. If you are struggling to find the right words to answer your children's questions, we offer these guidelines for talking with children.

Whenever we are talking to our children about situations that are frightening or scary, it is important to remember that the recent incident may bring up unresolved concerns from past incidents. Multiple situations in a short period of time can exponentially increase anxiety and fear.

One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is to allow them to talk about their concerns and provide them reassurance that we and the other adults in their lives will do everything possible to keep them safe. Maintaining normal daily routines also helps provide a sense of normalcy and security.

When talking to children about scary situations keep in mind, children are thinking and feeling something about the event, and children have a strong desire to be okay.

Thinking – Find out what your child knows about the event and give age appropriate information to clarify any misunderstanding they may have. When children are not given information they often put together bits and pieces of what they have heard and create their own perception of what has happened. Reassure your child that no question is too scary to ask. Let your child know that other children may be thinking and feeling the same way they are. They are not alone.

Feeling – Ask your child what they are feeling about what they have heard. Don't minimize or dismiss the child's feelings. Reassure the child that it is okay to be sad or scared or angry. It is also, okay to take a break and not want to talk about what has

happened. Children often use play as a way to get back to normal, or as a way to “play out” what they don’t have the words to explain.

Doing – Children will often feel better, if they have an opportunity to do something. Doing something gives the child a sense of efficacy in an overwhelming situation. What can a child do?

- Make a card for someone who has been hurt.
- Make a list of all the helpers in the community, like firemen, police officers, religious leaders and teachers.
- Make a list of all the people that care about them and display it.
- Read a book about a person who overcame challenging circumstances.
- Go for a walk in nature.
- Make a safety plan at home or at school.
- Learn some calming breaths or stretches for when they feel anxious or tense.
- Write in a journal or draw a picture.

It is important to limit your child’s exposure to media coverage. When young children see the event playing over and over again on television, they may think the incident is happening again and again.

[The National Association of School Psychologists](#) provides these helpful guidelines in its tips for talking with children about violence:

- **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.
- **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 and in their community. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safety.

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 communicating any personal safety concerns to parents, or to school administrators, and asking for emotional support if they need it

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