

# Talking to Children about Community Violence

By David Fassler, M.D.

Once again, parents and teachers are faced with the challenge of discussing a tragic incident of community violence with children. Although these may be difficult conversations, they are also important. There are no “right” or “wrong” ways to talk with children about such traumatic events. However, here are some suggestions that you may find helpful:

1. Create an open and supportive environment where children know they can ask questions. At the same time, it's best not to force children to talk about things unless and until they're ready.
2. Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually know, or eventually find out, if you're “making things up”. It may affect their ability to trust you or your reassurances in the future.
3. Use words and concepts children can understand. Gear your explanations to the child's age, language, and developmental level.
4. Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
5. Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important and appropriate.
6. Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about their own safety or the safety of teachers, friends and family members.
7. Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises. It's fine to let children know that they're safe in their house or in their school. But you can't promise that there will never be another incident of community violence.
8. Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may not want to talk about their thoughts, feelings, or fears. They may be more comfortable drawing pictures or playing with toys.
9. Let children know that lots of people are helping the students, teachers and families affected by the recent shootings.
10. Children learn from watching their parents and teachers. They are very interested in how you respond to local events. They also learn from listening to your conversations with other adults.
11. Don't let children watch too much television with frightening images. The repetition of such scenes can be disturbing and confusing.
12. Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past are particularly vulnerable to prolonged or intense reactions to news or images of violent incidents. These children may need extra support and attention.
13. Monitor for physical symptoms including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

14. Children who are preoccupied with questions or concerns about safety should be evaluated by a trained and qualified mental health professional. Other signs that a child may need additional help include: ongoing sleep disturbances, intrusive thoughts or worries, recurring fears about death, leaving parents or going to school. If these behaviors persist, ask your child's pediatrician, family physician or school counselor to help arrange an appropriate referral.

15. Although parents and teachers may follow the local news with close scrutiny, most children just want to be children. They may not want to think about violent events, even when they occur in a nearby community. They'd rather play ball, climb trees or ride bikes.

Incidents of community violence are not easy for anyone to comprehend or accept. Understandably, some young children may feel frightened or confused. As parents, teachers and caring adults, we can best help by listening and responding in an honest, consistent and supportive manner. Fortunately, most children, even those exposed to trauma, are quite resilient. However, by creating an open environment where they feel free to ask questions, we can help them cope with stressful events and experiences, and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties.

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<http://www.nctsnet.org>

and

[http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/Publications\\_browse.asp?ID=181&Topic](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/Publications_browse.asp?ID=181&Topic)