

## Talking to Children About Loss

*We chat, talk, tweet, stream, and absorb violence with a hunger. It's just so horrifying that sometimes it's hard not to watch. We follow along in bed, on the bus, in our cars (!), and during our face to face time with loved ones and family. This news is upsetting and torrential. Many of us are left feeling a bit helpless or vulnerable. So are our children." - Wendy Sue Swanson*

*"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world." - Mr Rogers*

When a tragedy happens that shakes our faith in human nature and our own sense of safety in the world, it's tough to talk with our kids about it. How can we reassure them that we'll keep them safe, when we suddenly aren't sure that we can?

The situation is so disturbing to us as adults that our children are likely to pick up on our upset. It's important to think about the effect on our children before just flooding kids with our own raw emotions. So before you talk with your child about a tragedy like a school shooting, reassure yourself. Your child is no less safe than he or she was last week. The chances of your family being touched directly by such a tragedy are much, much, much less than the chances of a car accident, and you get in a car every day.

If you have a hard time believing this, it's a red flag that you've exposed yourself too intimately to the news. It's our job as parents to manage our own emotions so they don't adversely affect our children. Every time you see more news about this tragedy, you're sending yourself back into fight or flight mode. It's hard not to watch, I know. In the face of the unbelievable, we find ourselves obsessed. But if you turn off the news, you'll be better able to stay centered, and better able to help your child.

And use common sense in discussing such an issue in front of children. Remember, your child is taking his cues from you. If you're anxious or hysterical when you're on the phone with a friend talking about this, you're giving your child the message that he's in danger--no matter what you say to him directly.

Start from the premise that your goal is to help your child integrate the news and feel safe. Use this as an opportunity to reassure and give age-appropriate information so he has a context for whatever he hears from his friends.

**1. Don't leave your TV on.** If there are kids under the age of thirteen at your house, your TV should stay off whenever there's a public tragedy, or you're repeatedly traumatizing your kids. Knowing there's been a shooting is one thing. Hearing over and over about the blood and bodies and screams is quite another. Your children don't need those horrific images replaying in their minds. Even babies and toddlers who don't understand the news coverage show elevated stress hormones when exposed to upset voices.

**2. Remember that your child will pick up on your emotions.** If you're upset by what you've just read or heard, calm yourself before interacting with your child, and don't try to talk with your children about the events at that moment. Find a way to process your emotions first. How?

- Talk (privately) to another adult.
- Breathe deeply.
- Shake tension out of your hands.
- Tap your acupuncture points to relieve emotional pressure and calm yourself (this is called [EFT](#), [there are instructions available here](#))

It's fine to tear up when you're talking with your child. But getting hysterical communicates to your child that you can't handle the situation, which decreases her sense of safety.

**3. Be age-appropriate.** Babies and Toddlers will not need to know about a disaster at all. And there is no need to raise the issue with your preschooler unless they have been exposed to it. However, many preschool and school-age children will hear about the shooting from someone else and will need your help to process it.

**4. Ask your child what she knows.** Even preschoolers may well hear about a school shooting from other children, and they may well ask you questions. If they bring it up, start by finding out what they have heard. *"What did you hear about that?"* Listen to their answers before jumping in to explain. Repeat to be sure you've understood: *"So Jimmy said that this bad guy had a gun and killed children at a school?"*

Ask your child what she thinks about the information. Most likely she will parrot what she's heard, but she may well give you some insight into what she needs to hear from you.

**5. Explain simply, in terms your child can understand.** Keep your explanation very simple: *"This man was very sick in his head...His mind wasn't working right...He should never have had a gun.... He is dead now...He can't hurt anyone else now."*

**6. Answer questions.** Your child may have questions about whether it will be safe for him to go to his own school. The answer, of course, is yes: *"Luckily, most people's brains work just fine and most people are not violent.....And the grown-ups in charge at your school are making sure that your school is completely safe. They do not let anyone into the school without checking that the person is safe and has a good reason to be there."*

Your child may have heard that the gunman in the Connecticut shooting killed his mother. Explain that he was angry at his mom, but that we all get angry and we don't kill people. The reason this young man killed his mother and other people is that he had an unusual mental illness, which meant his brain was not working right and he was violent. Stress that most people who are mentally ill would not do something like this; it is very rare.

Your child may also ask why this young man went into a school to kill kids. It is fine to answer that we don't know. But reassure your child that her school will keep her safe and something like this will not happen at her school.

Tailor your explanation to your child's developmental understanding. With all ages, let your child talk as much as he or she will. Answer questions truthfully, but with as limited information as possible. There is no reason to give your child details he isn't asking you for. As much as possible keep your own upset from coloring your presentation of the facts.

**7. Listen and allow feelings.** Talking to your child about a tragedy like this does not cause her to get upset; any child who hears about a school shooting will have some upset feelings. If your child senses that she isn't allowed to get upset, cry or show you that she's frightened or upset, then she'll push those feelings down inside, where they'll cause nightmares or anxiety. If, instead, you accept and reflect your child's feelings, those feelings will tumble out for a few days but then will dissipate. Remember that your child will almost certainly need to experience some terror she's holding in her body, which she will probably show you with aggression. If you can stay compassionate when she gets aggressive ("Sweetie, no hitting...You must be very upset to hit like that"), she'll show you the tears and fears behind her anger. The most helpful thing you can do is listen to your child's fears, hug her, and reassure her that you will always keep her safe.

**8. Stress that this is a rare occurrence.** Be aware that your child will need your reassurance that although we are all connected, and we feel for the people who were touched by this tragedy, she is safe. Stress that

incidents like this are very rare. Add that it's the job of grown-ups to keep kids safe, and that you and the other adults in your child's life will always work very hard to keep your child safe.

**9. Be prepared to answer more existential questions.** As with all tragedies, children of all ages may respond with spiritual questions about WHY something like this happens. How could this be allowed, in a "good" universe? Every parent will have a different response depending on her own life view, but an affirmation of hope and compassion is always in order: *"We don't know why, Sweetie. I agree, it's tragic, and it isn't fair. Let's use this to remind us that every day is precious and every person is to be treasured, and let's think about what we can do to help."*

Finally, offer some hope: *"There were lots of wonderful people helping each other....the good thing about people is that whenever there's a tragedy, you will always find people helping each other."*

**10. Respect your child's individual reactions.** Every child processes in her own way. Some children will become very sad and cry, and that is to be honored. Some will listen, change the subject, and then bring it up to ask you more questions at bedtime. Others will shrug it off, which doesn't mean they aren't compassionate but that they can only handle so much of the information at a time.

Be prepared for the issue to come up again with questions out of the blue, or for your child to need repeated reassurance. If your child seems very interested, help him process his emotions. For instance:

- Encourage him to draw pictures of what happened
- Ask him to write a story about what happened
- Suggest he do some research on mental illness or gun control.

Some children will want to tell you about the upsetting event over and over, which helps them work out their emotions. Plan to spend extra time at bedtime helping your child fall asleep feeling safe and secure.

**11. Be aware that children's anxieties often surface in other ways.** Children may develop sudden fears - of being alone in a room, or left with a babysitter. They may complain of stomach aches, might have nightmares or wet the bed. They may "over-react" and have a meltdown about something that seems trivial to you, which allows them to let off stress by crying or raging. Children who are afraid of losing you to death might "test" you by misbehaving to see if you love them enough not to abandon them. In all discussions about scary news, reassure your child that you will always do everything you can to keep her safe. You can't do this too many times.

**12. Empower your child.** Research shows that feeling unable to do something to help make things better makes people of all ages feel hopeless, cynical, and less compassionate. Discuss with your child what your family can do to help, such as:

- Send homemade condolence cards or other messages of love and support to the families.
- Give blood.
- Attend a candlelight vigil.
- Remember the families in your family grace and prayers.