

Talking About Loss

How to Help Children of Different Ages

Preschoolers (ages three, four and five) can't always tell the difference between a newscast and a tragedy unfolding in front of their eyes. It is critical to shield them from TV news.

If your child doesn't bring it up and you are sure she hasn't heard, then you don't need to raise the issue. However, sometimes kids hear things and don't raise them with you. If there is any chance your child could have heard about the school shooting, start a conversation by asking your child *"Do you feel safe at school?"* If your child has heard about the shooting, it will certainly come up. If he hasn't heard, he may answer, *"Yes, what do you mean?"* and you can reassure without having to lie by simply saying *"Your school works hard to keep everybody safe. I'm glad you feel safe there."*

Preschoolers are concrete, egocentric thinkers and often think that if something bad happens, they must have caused it, so they may think that somehow the children who were shot caused the incident by being "bad." Make it clear that the victims at the school did not know the gunman and did not do anything to cause the shooting. All children "misbehave" at times and it does not cause bad things to happen to them.

If your child seems to have a lot of questions about this or any other scary news issue, encourage him to express his feelings through art or play. For instance, maybe he wants to draw a picture, or act out a scene of the medics helping people.

If he's exploring issues of good and evil, he might develop a sudden fascination with guns or want to pretend shoot. Don't be horrified -- he's processing. Just be sure to say *"It's ok to play pretend guns because they can't hurt anyone, but real guns are VERY dangerous....If you ever see a real gun, any time, any place, you must leave the room immediately and call me, and I will come get you."*

6-9 year olds - As with younger kids, if your child brings up the shooting, ask what they've heard and repeat it. Ask what they think and answer their questions.

Be age-appropriate, which means not over-sharing. Kids don't need ANY gory details. Research shows that kids this age do have nightmares in response to TV news images, so they should still be protected from electronic news coverage. Recognize that kids' primary need is to be reassured of their safety. Feeling they live in a lawless world where evil runs rampant and they could get shot at school is not helpful to them. Instead, emphasize that the teachers in the school reacted promptly by taking all the kids into bathrooms and locking the doors to keep the kids safe.

9-12 year olds - Don't be fooled by your preteen's sophistication. Older kids still need your reassurance that they're safe. Begin by asking them what they have heard. Give them an explanation like the one above. Then ask them what they think, to have a real discussion. When things like this happen, we feel powerless and afraid. Having a problem-solving discussion is empowering. You might ask questions like:

- This man was angry, but he was also mentally ill to have done such a thing. Anger by itself would not cause this. Have you ever seen anyone so angry they hurt someone else? What do you think is the best way to manage anger?
- I wonder what kinds of clues were missed that would have showed how unhinged this man was?
- What do you think we can do to help people who have a mental problem like this?
- Do you think there should be more control over who can buy a gun? Any gun, or particular kinds of guns?
- What do you think should happen to someone who commits a crime like this?
- Do you think that it's a good thing to watch the news about an incident like this?

- There have been suggestions that this young man may have been bullied in school when he was young, and that's why he went into a school. What do you think schools can do to address bullying?
- What can your child do to reach out to kids who don't have social skills, so they don't feel isolated?

When you have a chance, guide the discussion to heroism. There's no way to make sense of a tragedy like this, but we can take some solace in the fact that dire circumstances can call forth the best in human beings. There are always ordinary people who act with great courage to shield others, or to help others. So help your child focus on that heroism.

- What do you think you would do in a situation like that?
- The teachers were heroes and protected the kids. USA Today reported that when one teacher was shot, a six year old boy in the class grabbed some other kids and pulled them out the door to safety. What do you think it would take to do that?

Obviously, you'll ask questions that are appropriate to the age of your child. You don't have to have answers to these questions to raise them, and there are no "right" answers. Thinking and talking about the questions that arise as we experience "big things" in life is an important part of children's moral development.

Teens - Tragedies like this can shake a teen's sense of living in a safe world, just as he or she is experimenting with more independence. Ask questions and listen for anxiety in the answers. Reassure your teen about how rare such an event is. Be sure to use the opportunity to explore the idea of heroism. Teens are exploring their identities, working out how they fit into the world, and how they can make a contribution. Discussions in which they envision themselves as courageous and heroic are always empowering.

Teens are also sorting out just what their connection is to all of humanity. Our hearts tell us we have some responsibility to all humans, even those far across the country. They'll be empowered by a discussion about ways they can help.

Sometimes teens defend against disturbing news with cynicism about news coverage. If your child raises this issue, you can use the opportunity for a "media literacy" discussion, but remind your child that the fact that the news media hypes stories to attract viewers doesn't diminish the pain of the events.