



Talking with Young Children about the School Shootings in Florida

The events in Broward County district of Florida were overwhelming and incomprehensible for all. Parents and professionals face the task of deciding what to tell young children and how to tell them in a way that provides the necessary information but is neither too scary nor too overwhelming for them. This is not easy because we as adults do not have all the answers, and many of us struggle with strong feelings of horror and sadness.

Before you talk to your child, it is important that you take stock of your own thoughts, beliefs, and reactions. Children, especially young children, are keenly aware of their parents' emotional responses. Your feelings and responses give children important cues about how they should react. If parents communicate a great deal of worry or fear, their children may react similarly. Because we as adults are likely to have strong feelings about these events, it is also important that we have support and connection with others so that we are not alone with these intense feelings.

Your relationship with your child as a parent or caregiver is the most important ingredient of help that you provide. Your ability to hear your child's worries, to accept them, and to provide comfort is the foundation of any discussion about a scary event. If you as a parent or caregiver are able to keep the communication open and be available for your child, you have laid the foundation for providing the best support possible.

It is important to remember that young children communicate their thoughts and worries in more ways than by verbal expression alone. Children may draw pictures or use dramatic play or storytelling to tell us their thoughts. We can help by making sure that children are given multiple ways to communicate and that we are sensitive to reading cues from these different expressions.

All families are different. Families cope with stress in many ways, using strengths that are drawn from religious or spiritual beliefs, traditions and relationships. There is no set script of words to use. The information we provide here is intended to give parents and professionals some guidelines to think about. It is not comprehensive, nor does it take into account every situation that you may face with a child.

Common Questions from Parents

Should I talk about the school shooting with my child? Perhaps because he/she is so young, I should not mention it.

If your child is old enough to go to pre-school or kindergarten, it is likely that they will hear something about the school shootings. Even a three-year-old may hear words or observe adults who are upset or worried. It is far better that your child get information about what happened from you than from another source. By initiating a discussion about it, you give the message that it is OK to ask questions and to talk about it again.

How do young children understand terrible events such as the school shootings?

Children's capacity to understand depends on age and ability to comprehend the world. They will not understand events in the same ways that adults do. They may know about an event because they hear adults talking or see the news, but they cannot really understand the complexities of these events. In the absence of information that is geared to their age level, they may make up their own version of the story. Here is a general summary of how children will think about events like those at Broward County.

Toddlers: They will have no understanding of the events apart from the reactions of their parents or caregivers. They are sensitive to the emotions and stress level of their parents. The ways that parents manage feelings of anger, sadness or worry affect a child's reaction.

Pre-schoolers: They have more ability to understand and if curious or concerned, are deserving of a brief explanation. However, they may question whether these events are real or not. Their capacities for distinguishing reality from fantasy are limited. Their main worry is likely to be about the safety of their parents and themselves: "Who will take care of me?"

Kindergarteners: They will have more understanding of cause and effect, but they still see the world in reference to themselves. Children will worry about safety, where the perpetrator is now and about whether the perpetrator has been arrested. They may worry about whether this could happen at their school.

Young school-age children: They have a sense of right and wrong, good and evil, and will be more focused on why this happened. They think in absolute terms; there is no gray area as children of this age attempt to make sense out of these events. They will need more information. They, too, may voice worries about their safety in school and why the shooter did what he did.

How or what should I tell my child?

Deciding what to tell your child is difficult. It is important to start by asking if the child has heard anything about what happened. This gives you an opportunity to learn what the child knows, how he/she knows it and what misunderstandings your child may have about the events. Children should have access to the basic information, but only as much information as they can understand. The decision about how much to tell a child depends on the child's age and developmental stage. A three-year-old needs different information than does a six-year-old. For example, to a three or four-year-old, curious or concerned about the recent events, you might say: "I want to tell you about a bad thing that has happened. A man with a gun shot a lot of people at a school. It happened in a town that's far away from here. Some of the people were hurt and some died. Many people are very sad about this, but we are safe here."

For a five or six-year-old, the explanation would be somewhat different. "This is hard to talk about. A lot of people are talking about a bad thing that happened. A man with a gun shot some people in a school. The school is in another state. It is not close to us here. Some people were hurt and some died. The police and rescue workers are helping to take care of the people. We are sad about this. But we are safe here."

For a seven or eight-year-old: "You may have heard about an awful thing that has happened. A lot of people are talking about it and it has been on TV. A man with a gun shot some people in a school. The school is in another state. It is not close to us here. Some children and grown-ups were hurt and some died. We don't know why the man did this. He must have been very angry or mixed up and couldn't think clearly. We hope this never happens again."

All children need reassurance that we as parents and adults are doing everything we can to keep them safe. Any discussion about violent incidents should include reassurances about the child's safety and the safety of the parent/family. In addition, you may wish to add that the leaders of our country and many policemen and other helpers are working to make sure that this does not happen again.

How should I expect my child to react to this kind of information?

Children will react in a range of ways. The reaction depends on the age, personality, and developmental ability of the child to understand the complexities of the events. Some will ask many questions. Others may show little reaction. Common reactions may include: worries about safety, asking the same questions repeatedly, asking no questions and not wanting to talk about it, sleep problems or bad dreams, increased clinginess with parents or caregivers, increased preoccupation with the tragedy or daydreaming; or reverting to less mature behaviors (thumb sucking, for example). These reactions are normal reactions to abnormal events, and parents should not worry about them. It takes time for all of us to calm down from events like these.

Some children will be pre-occupied with worry or questions about the shooter. “Why did the man do it?” “Has he been caught?” “Will this happen in my school?” These questions are normal because young children are in the process of developing morals and an understanding of right, wrong and consequences for behavior. In addition, these questions can reflect the basic fears of safety. The underlying question is “Am I safe?” or “Is my family safe?”

Some children will have no apparent reaction and seem unconcerned about what they are told. Others may laugh or make an inappropriate response to the news. They may seem to be callous or uncaring about the gravity of the situation. Children have different ways of taking in information and parents should not worry about these reactions. Parents should not push a child to talk about it, but rather leave the possibility open for future discussion.

When should I worry about my child’s reactions to traumatic news?

Remember that children’s responses to a terrible catastrophe are usually appropriate and understandable. Some children will be preoccupied for a few days; others may continue to talk about it for several weeks. Some children may not talk about it for days or weeks. If the intensity of your child’s reaction does not diminish or if your family has been more directly affected by the tragedy, you may consider outside help for your child. If your family has suffered other stresses or losses, your child’s reactions may be more intense. If your child’s reactions are noticeably different from those of his/her peers, you may want to seek advice. Remember that you know your child better than anyone, and if you are worried, seek help. You may talk with other parents, your child’s teacher, the school psychologist or guidance counselor or your child’s pediatrician to get advice on how to help your child. Even very young children may benefit from therapeutic intervention if they are extremely distressed.

Summary: Do’s and Don’ts for Parents

- Take the time to be aware of your own feelings and reactions. Children are keenly aware of their parent’s emotions and worries. If you are too upset, anxious or worried about troubling current events, wait to talk with your child, or ask someone else who is close to them to do so.
- Be willing to talk to your child about the school shooting, particularly if you think he/she might know something about this event.
- Limit your child’s access to television, newspapers and magazines with graphic images of violence. For very young children, avoid exposure to the media altogether.
- Spend extra time with your children if possible. Be available to answer questions.
- Take your child’s questions seriously and be prepared to answer the same question repeatedly.
- Give your child enough information to answer his/her questions, but no more.
- Don’t worry if your child does not talk about these very much. Children have different styles and timetables for processing information.
- Pay particular attention to bed-time routines and take extra time for being close to your child.
- Maintain the daily routine. Predictability and routine are comforting for children.
- Offer your child opportunities to help or to do something positive. Children feel better when they can offer concrete assistance.

*For further information or referral call the Child Witness to Violence Project at Boston Medical Center:
617-414-4244.*

Web-based Resources:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/terrorism>

The American Academy of Pediatrics: www.AAP.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org

The Child Witness to Violence Project: www.childwitnessstoviolence.org