

Talking To Your Child About Tragedy: Tips for Parents

Adapted from NASP (National Association of School Psychologists)

1. Explain to your child that you need to talk to them about a difficult situation. Ask if they are aware of the situation and what he/she already knows about the incident. Listen without interrupting.
2. Explain what happened in simple and direct terms. Keep your vocabulary appropriate to your child's developmental level. Clear up any misperceptions or misinformation that your child might have shared in simple and direct terms. If there is information that you do not know or cannot share, acknowledge that simply and directly.
3. Open up the conversation and review safety procedures.
 - a. **Early elementary school children** need brief, simple information balanced with reassurances that they are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple reminders of procedures and practices that help keep children safe. Make sure your child can articulate the trusted adults that he/she can go to for support.
 - b. **Upper elementary and early middle school children** will have more pointed questions about safety and details about the situation. Answer their questions honestly and clearly. Emphasize that even though "bad" things can happen to people, such incidents are rare and there are many steps adults and children can take to keep themselves safe. Ask your child to review with you all the ways that adults and children keep themselves safe. Make sure your child can articulate the trusted adults that he/she can go to for support.
 - c. **Upper middle and high school students** may be much more vocal in sharing their worries or anger about the situation. Encourage your child to express his/her thoughts and feelings and engage them in problem-solving about how adults and teens can work together to keep everyone as safe as possible. Brainstorm with your child what he/she can do help if he/she is worried about others. Make sure your child can articulate the trusted adults that he/she can go to for support.
4. Share your thoughts and feelings about the event but limit the expression of your distress in front of your child. You don't need to maintain a stoic front but sharing your fears and severe distress can be traumatic to your child. Express an appropriate level of concern paired with your adult perspective that we all can and do make it through bad times. Model healthy coping strategies. Be sure to seek additional support for yourself if your distress lingers or interferes with your daily life.
5. Limit media coverage when necessary. None of us need a constant diet of stressful information. Be aware of how much your child is exposed to media surrounding the difficult event and step in to limit information when needed.
6. Maintain a normal routine. A regular schedule helps children feel that life is predictable and safe. Expect your child to maintain a regular routine of schoolwork and activities unless they are

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overwhelmed. If your child experiences distress, make yourself more available and schedule additional family time to surround your child with a sense of predictability and caring.

7. Observe your child's emotional and physical state. Changes in behavior, appetite and sleep patterns can indicate a child's level of anxiety or worry. Children in significant distress, for example, might experience nightmares or stomach-aches, want to stay home from school or demonstrate increased irritability or worry. Other children are able to articulate their feelings and concerns more directly. If your child's behavior changes drastically following an incident or if he/she remains distressed over time, seek professional guidance. Children who have experienced past traumas, who are more emotionally sensitive, or who experience depression or anxiety tend to be at higher risk for significant reactions.

Additional Resources:

Tips on Helping You and Your Family from NCPA (North Carolina Psychological Association),
<http://www.ncpsychology.org/general-public/disaster-resources/tips-on-helping-you-and-your-family>

Talking to Children about Violence from TeacherVision,
www.teachervision.fen.com/safety/resources/6812.html