

Supporting children after a public act of violence or community tragedy

After a public act of violence, it is common to experience a wide range of responses, including fear, shock, anger, grief, and anxiety. Children's behaviors may change: they may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, changes in appetite, and sudden changes in moods. This is normal.



Here are a few ways adults can connect with and support children after a public act of violence or tragedy in the community:

Talk about it.

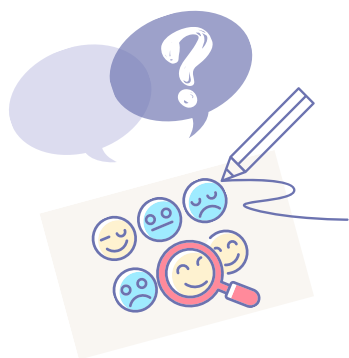
Talking to children about their feelings and ideas is the first step in helping them feel safe. Silence, downplaying, or hiding the event may cause fear and anxiety, and teaches children that some things are too big to talk about. What you talk about and how you say it depends on their age, but all children deserve to be heard.



- Find a time they are most likely to talk (in the car, before dinner, at bedtime, or at the end of class). Start the conversation by letting them know you are aware of and care about their feelings and thoughts. Remind them that you are there for them, but do not force them to talk.
- Actively listen to their thoughts and point of view. Allow them to express their ideas and feelings before you respond. If needed, gently correct misinformation or misperceptions.
- Give simple, repeated explanations using language and words they understand. They might have to hear the same thing multiple times until it sinks in.
- Remind them you are there to provide safety, comfort, and support. You can do so by reinforcing ideas of safety and security. If you know, share what changes schools and communities are doing to increase safety.
- Give an age-appropriate, consistent, and honest explanation about death. If needed, encourage them to find their own way to say goodbye (practice a cultural and religious ceremony, drawing, lighting a candle, writing a letter, etc).

Be patient and provide ongoing care.

After witnessing an act of violence or experiencing a sudden loss, there can be both immediate and delayed reactions. Children may have a hard time expressing their needs. Be patient and encourage them to continue asking questions and reassure them that they are safe. Spend quality time together, be patient, and provide extra attention. If you are comfortable, offer physical contact – hugs, lap sitting, holding hands, and extra cuddles can help provide reassurance. Encourage children to share their feelings by talking, drawing/painting, journaling, or telling stories. Hold space for all their feelings, worries, and question



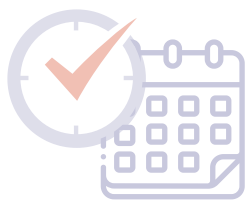
Additional Resources:

Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health 24/7 ACCESS Center at (800) 854-7771 crisis counseling, assessment, and referrals.

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Maintain routines.

Routines give children a sense of predictability and safety. Help maintain a calm environment at home or in the classroom by keeping activities and schedules the same. If there are changes in a schedule or location, update the child in advance. This can help create an environment that feels safe.



Suggest breaks from the media.

We are all exposed to so much information from social media, TV, or newspapers. It's important that we intentionally limit our time with these platforms because constant exposure can increase anxiety and fear. Talk to them about what they read and calmly provide facts. Encourage them to take breaks from their devices and the media. Or, offer to read articles or watch news stories together.



Empower.

When things feel out of control, it is important to re-establish a sense of power. Provide options for everyday activities and give them the opportunity to choose (ex: "Do you want a PB&J or a grilled cheese?" or "Do you want to walk to the park or ride a bike?"). Simple offerings like these can re-build a sense of power.



Help is available.

If you or the child feel stuck or overwhelmed, consider reaching out to an expert who could help. A licensed mental health professional can assist you and the in developing a strategy for moving forward. It is important to get professional help if you feel like you or your children are unable to function or perform basic activities of daily living at any time.



Be a healthy model and take care of yourself!

Looking after others while you yourself are frightened or anxious is not easy! It is important that you take care of yourself too. Modelling is a huge way children learn, so it is important that adults are a positive role model for them. Be aware of how you are talking about the event in front of them. Take breaths and media breaks together. Share ideas for healthy coping. Practice self-care by taking some time for yourself, even if it is only a few minutes to take a breath or go outside and reset. Make sure you are staying hydrated, eating well, and getting enough sleep. Model by asking for help and support when you need it.

Adapted from articles by The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

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