

Talking with Children about Tragedies and Terrorism

We are all agonizing over the tragic events in the United States these past weeks and months. Something horrific has taken place that makes no sense at all. How do we possibly explain what happened to our children, when we ourselves cannot begin to comprehend it?

Here are a few thoughts that may be helpful in navigating this impossible situation with children.

Answer questions based on what your children know. Your first question should be, *“It’s good that you came to me with this question. Can you tell me what you have heard?”*

Less is more. Many children only want to know: *Am I safe? Could this happen to me?* Read between the lines of your children’s questions and recognize that what they want most is reassurance. After you’ve offered a minimal amount of information, take note as to whether they are satisfied, for now, with what you said. Don’t flood children with more information than they are ready to process.

Limit exposure to media. Although you may find yourself drawn to the television for news updates, children have thin filters and are easily traumatized by dramatic images and interviews. Keep young children away from broadcasts about the event. With teens who are keen to stay up to date on what’s going on, sit with them to talk, answer questions, and/or join them in feeling sorrow, fear, or outrage.

Stay close. What children are most comforted by is your calm, loving presence. Cuddle, have a pillow fight, or snuggle up together for some connection time. When children sense your anxiety skyrocketing, or we leave them to fend for themselves while we binge on media reports, they are left with their own scary thoughts.

Allow them to offload their worries. Children manage fears much more successfully when they do not hold them inside, where they can become magnified and distorted. Encourage your children to express their worries with you. Even if you're unable to thoroughly bank their concerns, simply getting them out in the open and feeling your strength will offer them great comfort.

Emphasize that you and your children are safe. Now, of course we may not feel so safe in the midst of random acts of violence, but statistically speaking, we are. With younger children in particular, you will want to emphasize that the bad guys have been caught, and that there are many, many people watching out for our safety and well-being. Naturally, older teens may want to dive more deeply into the subject. Take it slowly, and emphasize again that statistically speaking, we are safe **and** it is heartbreaking that there are people in the world who feel so much pain or despair that they would resort to violence.

Model calm. Children look to us to decide how they should feel about something. If you are frantic or beside yourself with worry, your children cannot help but be negatively affected. Find ways to bolster your spirit, whether it's prayer, meditation, yoga, music, or time in nature to help you regain a sense of equilibrium

as best you can so that you can be a calming presence for your kids.

Maintain rituals. Children are greatly comforted by moving through their days with predictability when the world outside feels so very unpredictable. Stick to routines. Maintain your typical rules and limitations. That means no hour runs on video games or a reprieve on brushing their teeth. Continuity with the world before these awful events helps children feel that life will go on in peace.

Watch for signs of anxiety or stress. These include changes in appetite, difficulty focusing on schoolwork, headaches, sleep problems, irritability, nightmares, and of course heightened anxiety. If these behaviors last for more than a week or so, and your child's teacher is seeing similar behavior in the classroom, seek help from the school counselor or outside professional support