

Supporting Children in the Aftermath of Violence

In the wake of recent shootings and violent deaths around the country, children may have questions and also need the support of loving and caring adults. The following are some suggestions for providing support and reassurance to your children.

Be honest. Use age-appropriate language and sensitivity, but let your children know that you are open to communicating, even difficult things. Most parents and guardians would prefer that children receive sensitive or difficult information from them rather than acquiring inaccurate or distorted information from others.

Be open to questions but do not force anything. Also remember that it's okay to let children know that we may never know all of the answers to all of their questions - especially as to *why* these things happen.

Simplicity can be an important technique when communicating difficult information. “He used a gun and the people died” or “The person died because she hit him very hard and caused his body to stop working.” Although these conversations can be challenging, simplicity allows children to process at a level that works for them; it also leaves the potential for them to return to ask more questions at a later time when they are ready or desire more information.

Reassure children that - while these events are extremely tragic and disturbing - they are, thankfully, not regular occurrences. Although no one can promise that bad things will never again happen, reassurance that you will always do your best to protect your children and keep them safe can be comforting. Also explaining that the actions of one person do not mean that all people are scary or bad may help to alleviate undue anxiety on the part of children.

Hugs and loving touch can provide support and amazing non-verbal messages of reassurance, comfort, and stability.

Limit your child's access and exposure to media coverage of the event. Children are literal, and they may believe that the event is happening over and over again if they view coverage of it repeatedly. It may be helpful to limit your own exposure to the events as well.

Frank, yet sensitive, discussions about mental illness could be helpful as well - again, at an age-appropriate level. If the individual who enacted the violence has a known mental health diagnosis, this may help to explain his/her actions. It is important to emphasize to children, however, that not everyone with a mental health diagnosis is violent (and that not everyone who enacts violence has a mental health diagnosis). (E.g., “She is a person living with depression (or schizophrenia, etc.); and it is very possible that her mental illness caused her thoughts to be mixed up and caused her to harm others.”) Also significant here, however, is to remind children that those living with a mental health diagnosis deserve appropriate care and compassion just as those with physical illnesses do.

Give yourself time to process the shock, pain, anger, confusion, sorrow, anxiety, and/or fear that the recent violence may engender. Simultaneously, it is important for children to feel safe and secure and to know that they can count on loving adults to be there for them.

Remember that children may have different responses to this tragic event. Some may play and act normally while others may withdraw. Others may be more anxious and worried. Still others may be more clingy than normal. Any serious and prolonged changes in eating or sleeping habits or behavior should be checked out with a pediatrician.