

How to talk to kids about the Newtown school shooting

From our guest contributor, Michele Borba.



The senseless school shooting that happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School in the small town of Newtown, Connecticut is every parent's nightmare. My heart breaks, as I'm sure yours, when I think about these families. As of this moment 28 people, 20 of whom were children between four and ten years of age, have died. All of us-including our children-are trying to make sense of the unimaginable. If you're a parent or a teacher you may be wondering how to talk about this tragedy with your children. Here are a tips I hope will help you have a most difficult but necessary conversation. Gauge these pointers to the age and maturity of your child.

1. Keep yourself strong

Don't expect to be able to help allay your kids' anxiety, unless you're keeping your own in check. You can tell your kids you're calm and not concerned, but unless your behavior sends the same message, your words have no meaning. Your kids mirror your behavior. They will be calmer if you are calmer. Turn off TV. You need to be strong and calm for your children.

2. Talk about the tragedy

Please, please don't think because your child isn't talking about the tragedy, that he isn't hearing about it. He needs to

get the facts right – and you’re the best source. My “TALK Model” may help you remember the four important parts to talking about this or any tragedy with your child.

Use T.A.L.K. to Discuss A Tragedy With Kids

T – Talk about the event. Ensure that your child has accurate information and isn’t developing unfounded fears

A – Assess kid’s coping. Every child handles a tragedy differently. There is no predicting. Stay tuned into your child’s feelings and how he deals with the event

L – Listen to where your child is coming from. Use the “Talk Stop. Listen. Talk. Stop. Listen” model-follow your child’s lead

K – Kindle hope that the world will go on despite the horror

Here are strategies that may you use T.A.L.K. as you discuss this tragedy with your child.

~ **Plan your chat.** This will be a difficult talk, so take time to plan what you want to say to your child. Think through your lines. Anticipate your child’s questions (though you never know what may be asked so be prepared for anything). Planning your discussion will help boost your confidence and make you appear calmer.

~ **Find out what they know.** Peers talk. Cell phones access the Internet. Access to news is everywhere. Begin any talk by getting on the same page as your child so you can direct the conversation accordingly. “What do you know?” or “What have you heard?” are good openers.

~ **Don’t worry if you don’t have all the answer.** None of us do. It’s okay to tell your child: “I don’t know, but I’ll find that out.” Keep in mind that kids usually ask only what they can understand.

~ **Use a kid-oriented talk framework.** You'll be altering your talking points to your child's age and maturity. Your discussion can be as long or as short as your child needs. Kids don't need all the horrific details. For instance, give only information that is needed or asked. "Yes, 27 people died." But you don't have to describe the types of injuries, etc. Children can be literal ("Rapid fire" connotes a fire to a child) so try to think like your child.

~ **Give information in little nuggets**—small little doses—instead of a lecture format. Don't explain more than your child is ready to hear. Don't give out details that your child doesn't need to know.

~ **Honor the silence.** Your child may be trying to process what you're saying. This is a lot to take in so allow time for your child to process the information. This is a difficult topic.

~ **Answer your child's questions matter-of-factly.** You never know what may be asked – or not asked so be prepared for anything. "Why did he shoot those kids?" is one of the toughest questions. Answer based on your beliefs but don't give kids the view that's how all people are.

~ **Keep the conversation going.** Let your child know you're available to talk at any time or any place. Tell him, "You may have other questions, so come to me!" Let him know this is an ongoing conversation—if he so chooses.

~ **Use a safe starter.** A safe way to begin a conversation with a teen is to ask: "What are your friend saying?" Don't assume because your kid is older or isn't saying anything he isn't affected by this. Many kids will hold in their concerns which is why you should initiate the conversation. You might also want to ignite that social justice element in your tween or teen: "What do you think our country should do?" Spark the conversation about gun laws. Talk about rights. Teens can get passionate. Listen. Let your kid talk. It's empowering.

~ **Assure safety.** A prime concern of children is their own safety. Young kids are egocentric so don't be surprised if their big worries appear "self-centered" – "What about me?" "Is he coming to get me, too?" Be clear that the gunman is caught. "You are safe. We are safe." Young children do not have an understanding of time or space. "That happened way far away." Or "That happened in the next school." Let your child know what action your community is taking to assure safety: "The teachers locked down all the schools." "The police were called." "The doctors ran to help." If your child is going back to school on Monday, describe safety measures the school is doing to protect kids. A letter from your principal may have arrived home outlining what the school is doing to protect kids. If your child is anxious, review parts of the letter or the school website that lists safety procedures. While you can't promise safety, you can assure your child that everyone is doing everything to keep kids safe because people care.

3. Tune into your child's feelings

Do know that kids respond to tragic news differently. Follow your child's lead. Kids need to know that it is okay to share their feelings with you and that it's normal to be upset. Help her find healthy ways to express his concerns. Do feel free to express your own sorrow or feelings: "Yes, I'm upset." "I feel so sad for the families." What's most important is letting your child know you are available to listen.

4. Turn off the TV

Too much television is never good for kids, but with news showing such horrific images of a tragedy, it's especially important to monitor how much your kids are watching. If your kids do watch the news, watch with them to answer their questions and certainly limit their exposure. Seeing repeated violent images exacerbates existing anxiety and actually increases it in some kids. But it also increases the "fear factor." Viewing images of grief could also retrigger feelings

of sadness in kids who have recently dealt with grief.

Beware: younger children often assume that those repeated images of the same event may believe the shooting is happening over and over again.

Don't assume because your child is older, he is immune to those images. A Time/CNN survey found tweens are especially impacted by late-breaking news. When surveyed, they admitted that those news bulletins –without an adult there to help interpret them—are very stressful. Be there! Limit those images.

5. Comfort kids with family activities

In times of stress, kids need to feel embraced by their family. That's why it's a good idea to spend plenty of time doing things together over the weekend—it helps her feel safe and sends a “we're all in this together” message. Find tension-releasing activities the entire family can do together. For instance, go for walks or bike rides, pray or meditate, listen to soothing music or watch humorous videos. And engage in—or create—comforting family traditions: attend a religious service, or light a nightly candle to convey your sorrow.

6. Stick to routines

One of the best ways to alleviate anxiety is to stick to your normal routines. It is comforting and soothing to kids to know that life is normal—even though the news is giving them quite a different message. So stick to your routines. It sends a clear message that even during a tragedy, parents keep going to work, kids continue going to school, and the world will go on.

7. Tune into anxious kids

Watch your more sensitive child closer or your child who may have experienced a recent trauma during these next days or weeks. Trauma could be the death of a loved one, severe

bullying, the deployment of a parent, experiencing a flood, fire, or severe weather such as Sandy. Certain kids are more vulnerable to anxiety or heightened stress during such tragedies. Of course you never know how any child – regardless of age – will respond. It's why it's important for you to be available. If you see anxiety and stress linger, become more pronounced, spill over into other areas of your child's life, please call for the help of a mental health professional.

8. Do something proactive as a family

One of the best ways to reduce feelings of anxiety is to help kids find proactive ways to allay their fears. It also empowers kids to realize they can make a difference in a world that might appear scary or unsafe. For instance, help your child draw or write letters or have your kids help you send "hugs" (a teddy bear, crayons, coloring book) to the children in the community.

9. Point out the heroism

Please also draw your child's attention to stories of heroism and compassion—the teachers, the police, the doctors—everyone in that community who was there to try to help these children. Point out those wonderful simple gestures of love and hope that people do for one another and often are lost in such a tragedy. Find those stories in the newspaper and share them with your family. USA Today reported stories of heroism in the midst of chaos that our kids should hear:

~ A six year old boy grabbed his pals and ran out the door to safety after the gunman shot their teacher.

~ A teacher hearded her students into the bathroom, locked the door and blocked it with a tall storage unit to keep them safe.

~ Another teacher hid four of her students under the computer desk and shelves until they were told, "You're safe!"

10. Help your child learn to grieve

Now is the time to help your child adopt your religious beliefs or instill your values. Do what you believe with your children. For instance: Pray as a family. Attend a service together. Light candles together. Doing so is empowering to a child. The ritual will help them cope now but also know how to handle grief on a more personal issue later.

It's so important to assure your children that there's more to the world than tragedy and fear. They need to see the world as far more hopeful place. Your actions can make a big difference in helping to send them that message.

Now go hug your kids!

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