

## When a School Shooting/Catastrophic Events Happen Close To Home Thoughts for Parents

None of us want our children to have to grow up in a world with threatening or terrifying events. Whether your child is directly impacted by an event in his/her own school or there is television coverage of a major event in your area, we sometimes wonder what to say to our kids. There are several concerns parents might have when debating what to say or not say:

- If they aren't talking about it, maybe they're not bothered and maybe my bringing it up will make them worry about it.
- If I don't know what to say to make it better, I'd be better off to appear unconcerned.
- I don't know what I can do to make the world a safer place, so how can I reassure my child?

So, sometimes we're not sure whether talking about it with our kids will make them worry more or help them feel more confident. Here are some considerations:

- Often we don't bring things up because we want to protect our children's innocence. This results in:
- Children "read" us well, so they don't bring things up they think we want to avoid discussing. This results in:
- Children harbor fears in silence and often feel very alone in their anxiety. Then:
- Children make up stories to fill in the blanks. Some of the stories they make up can leave them feeling hopeless, which can lead to more anxiety, for some, depression, and a range of other kinds of reactions. They begin to integrate these stories into their new framework of the world – of whether they're safe, of whether they can have hope and optimism, or whether they trust others in their world, including adults!
- There are ways we ask questions that help kids open up and ways we close them down.

Probably the biggest mistake that we make as parents is to assume that if our child isn't bringing something up, it must be because they aren't worried about it or don't know about it. What is true, however, is that children take their cues from us and often harbor their own fears quietly, thinking that they shouldn't bring it up, because in the past they've seen our discomfort when their issues need something bigger than just our reassurance.

When we feel powerless and helpless, our children feel that way as well. If, however, they can bring up their fears and we are not afraid to talk with them about those fears, they feel confident that, no matter how bad things get, they won't be facing it alone. In other words, it is more important to allow them to speak about their fears and find us open and understanding than it is for us to have an answer that tries to take those fears away. One of the most important things to reinforce at this point is that the way we get through things is **together** and that they need reassurance that you aren't going to abandon them in their fears.

Before you begin your conversation with your child, read through to the end of this information. First is the outline of the process you might use, but there are insights shared after that part of this flyer that will give you a clearer picture of the goals you might have. If the incident was something that happened at your child's school or your child has already voiced concern or fear, you might use this framework (leaving out whatever doesn't apply):

- **State the obvious.** Nobody expected XXX to happen at your school (or the neighboring school) today. When really unexpected things happen, we have a whole range of reactions (or you might say "feelings").
- **Decide whether to ask your child directly or indirectly about reactions:**
  - **Directly:** What are some of the kinds of feelings you have right now?



- **Indirectly:** What are some of the kinds of feelings you think your classmates may have? (Mostly, youth report their own reactions when trying to imagine what their classmates are feeling, but you can always follow up with “is that true for you?” to know more clearly.)
- **What were some of the things people did right away that were helpful?** This reinforces to children that, as bad as things can get, usually there is some action taken by adults that made a difference.
- **What are some things that people at school could do to help you feel safer?** Of course, you can’t promise to your child that these things will be done, but it is very helpful information for you to give back to the school.
- **What are some things we could do at home that would help you feel safer?** You don’t necessarily have to do them all, but hearing them may surprise you. The requests may be things you’d have never dreamed and may make all the difference for your child. “Buck up and be tough” really isn’t sound psychological advice for our children. For one thing, it suggests that you don’t want to hear about it when things are not going well, that you expect them to buck up and manage on their own. We need to work at keeping the lines of communication open with our kids. The older they are, the more difficult that is, so don’t think you’ll establish that later!
  - Sometimes what children want is a night light or music playing till they’re asleep or to bring a sleeping bag in your room because they’re afraid to sleep. For the first few days, there is nothing wrong with that for students of any age. If their bedtime fears persist, talk to the school counselor to get some ideas.
- **What do you wish adults understood about what it is like to be a kid today?** Again, this is about your child talking and about you listening! Read through this to see the bigger picture here, but this isn’t a time for you to answer their replies. It is a time for you to listen!

Some other possible questions, depending on the circumstances, might include:

- What could students do to help one another right now?
- Are there certain times or places that will make you feel anxious?
- What has your teacher said that has been helpful? Things you’ve heard that are make it worse?
- Are there changes that could be made in the classroom – where you sit or who you sit near – that would make a difference for you?
- Who do you most look forward to seeing tomorrow?

**Here is the key!** Your children don’t need you to become instant counselors. They also don’t need your advice! They need you to be listening WAY more than trying to tell them why they don’t need to worry. Most of why parents do that is because of our own discomfort around seeing our children struggle. At this point, you need to be doing maybe 10% of the talking and 90% of the listening! We don’t do that most of the time as parents. We want to offer advice and make our kids more successful and happier. But right now, they need something else from us. Compassion. Understanding. Time. Closeness. Too often parents want to convince their kids not to be worried or we try to use rational reasons when they are needing something other than rational facts. What your kids need right now is the tremendous relief it is to put words to their fears, to hear their own words, to have you encourage them to **tell you more... to take you deeper into their world**. Responses from you like, “Really,” “I’d have never realized that,” or “Tell me more about that,” are some helpful phrases.

Be sure to end your conversations with two things: Letting them know how glad you are that they would share their deeper thoughts and feelings with you, and a word of hope, such as, “As difficult as this is right now, I know that getting through this time together will be better for both of us than trying to do this alone. Let’s talk about this again (soon) (on the way to whatever). Make it clear that you want to continue the conversation.

Remember, this is a process, not a one-time conversation. Revisiting this several times might be in order.

