

Talking to children about school shooting

Courtesy of CHKD

Tragedies like the school shooting in Connecticut can cause very real anxiety in children, even when they are not personally affected by them. "The need to feel safe, to feel protected, is a basic need of childhood," says CHKD parent educator Sam Fabian. "The increased violence that has occurred over the past years doesn't change that need. It only means that parents need to work even harder to make sure their children feel safe," she says.

Fabian offers the following information to help minimize children's fear and anxiety and help them feel safer.

Q: How do I talk to my children about the school shooting?

SF: Little children, around 5 and younger, don't need to know about things like this. Do not watch TV stories about the event while children are in the room. You do not need to bring this up as a topic of conversation with small children. You can wait for children to ask you about what happened. If they never ask, continue business as usual. Older children are likely to approach you with questions. Or you can initiate a conversation by saying, "I know you're hearing and seeing a lot about what happened at the school in Connecticut. How does this make you feel?" But I wouldn't prepare a big speech trying to explain it all to them. I'd wait for them to ask you questions, and then answer each question with reassuring information that reflects your family's values and history.

Q: My child seems so frightened that he could get hurt. How do I reassure him?

SF: Tell him, "It's normal to feel frightened. If I was your age, I'd be scared, too. But I'm older than you. I've seen lots of bad things like this happen before, and lived through them. It seems frightening, doesn't it? As if you could be a victim too...I felt that way when I was your age too. Tell him that you will always do everything you can to keep him safe and that if you thought it was dangerous to go somewhere you wouldn't let him go."

Q: Should I let my child watch the news?

SF: In this case I'd definitely limit it. It brings the event, and all of the emotions it engenders, right into your home. And when we sit glued to the news coverage of a shooting it tells our children "this is something Mommy or Daddy are really worried about, so I should probably worry about it, too." Watch the late news, after the children are in bed.

Q: Are there other things we should or shouldn't do as parents?

SF: I would encourage parents to be careful about what they say in front of their children. Keep your own emotions in check. Kids pick up on everything and if we are lamenting the terrible state of the world and saying things like "I'm afraid to go anywhere any more," children will start to feel that the world is indeed a scary place.

Q: But what if we really do feel like that?

SF: You don't have to share all of your feelings with your children. One of child psychologists has a favorite analogy to illustrate that. Pretend you're driving a car down an unfamiliar, twisty, turning road in the dark. Should you say to your child "We're going into some dangerous territory and I'm not sure if I handle it? I may need you to grab the wheel every once in a while? No you should not. Children need to be children. They need to know that you are sitting confidently in the driver's seat. To continue the analogy, it would be much more loving to say, "it's going to be dark for a while. Here's your blanket. Why don't you snuggle up for a while and I'll wake you when we get there. Let them know that you are still in control and that, no matter what, you will protect them just as you always have.

Q: How do I explain the kind of people who would do something like this?

SF: I'd go back to your family history. How have you explained bad things in the past? Be consistent and age appropriate. With little kids, I'd stay away from phrases like "bad guys" because to them that can mean the bully at school, causing even more fear. I'd use terms like, "bad *things* happen sometimes in this world."

After age 7 or 8, children may need to have more in-depth explanations. Encourage your child to talk, and listen carefully to her so you can understand her perceptions of the event. Help her identify and label her feelings. Then address each issue in a way that reassures your child and reflects your family values.

Q: What signs should I look for that will tell me my child is having a tough time coping with this tragedy?

SF: Until things calm down, it will be normal for children to show signs of worry and fear. Just like many adults, they may have trouble eating or sleeping. Two weeks from now, if your child still isn't eating or sleeping normally, or shows other warning signs such as extreme irritability, weepiness, lethargy and reluctance toward or fear of activities she once enjoyed, call your pediatrician.