

Helping Children Deal with Tragedies In response to School Shootings

Provided by County of San Diego (Calif.) Behavioral Health Services

What parents should talk about with children:

Recognize the sudden, unexpected, tragic event. Be clear that children and teachers were hurt, don't be vague. If the child asks if anyone died, tell the truth as they will certainly hear it via media.

Confirm that a lot of people are scared and sad. Confirm that some people will be worried for a while

Safety plans are in place. Let the children know the schools, law enforcement, and government workers have been making safety plans for all of the schools in our area and that their safety and security is the most important thing in their mind.

Provide emotional support. It may take a few minutes or hours (even days) for the emotional impact to reach the children. When it does, provide nurturance (hugs, empathy, kindness, calm support) and ask about their thoughts and feelings. Be prepared for children to need this several times.

Do not have the TV news about the event on for an extended period of time. The news stations wish to inform people about progress of the investigation and other aspects of the case- this is not helpful for children as multiple exposures to this information can exaggerate the event in their minds.

Make sure to spend family time together doing normal activities. Regular meal times, bedtimes, play times. For some children there may be mild disruptions in sleep, appetite, and social interest. If these problems go on for more than a few days, contact your family doctor or your local crisis line.

Behavioral signs that may indicate your child is reacting to the event

Birth through 2 years: Infants may react to trauma as a result of their parents' anxiety and/or reaction. This may include being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be cuddled.

Preschool: These children do not have the capacity to fully understand, but may understand enough to feel helpless and overwhelmed. They may feel fear and insecurity about being separated from caregivers. Their play activities may reenact the incident.

Elementary School: These children have a better ability to understand and sometimes become intensely preoccupied with the details of the event and want to talk more about it. Other reactions may include sadness, generalized or specific fears about the event happening again, guilt, overreaction or inaction, anger that the event was not prevented, or have fantasies of playing rescuer.

Middle School/High School: Teenagers may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors such as reckless driving or alcohol and drug use. Others can become fearful of leaving home. A teenager may have intense feelings but may not want to discuss them with others. They may not want to attend school or participate in school-based activities. School performance may decline. Teens may become argumentative and/or withdrawn.

Resources

Talking to Kids About School Safety

<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/talking-kids-about-school-safety>

Helping Children Cope with Disaster-Related Anxiety

<http://www.nmha.org/go/information/get-info/coping-with-disaster/helping-children-handle-disaster-related-anxiety>