

Talking with Children about Tragic Events and Helping Them Regain a Sense of Safety and Control

By: Orly Zimmerman-Leizerov, LCSW-C

“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”

– Fred Rogers

The impact that tragic events have on children can be significant and reach far beyond the children who were directly impacted by the loss of loved ones in their families or communities. In the wake of a tragic event and exposure to news or media coverage around the event, many parents are worried about what and how to tell their children about the event. Talking with children could be especially challenging, since in many of these situations, adults might be struggling with their own overwhelming difficult feelings about what has happened. Exposure to media coverage, images and accounts of the event can cause many adults to struggle with feeling hopeless, insecure, and even depressed. It’s important for children to know that they can talk with adults about their feelings and that the adults can handle their feelings and help them cope. Adults need to provide children with a safe space to express and process the event, help them feel reassured and regain a sense of personal safety and control.

Taking care of yourself has to come first:

Children are born to the world highly sensitive to their parents and caretakers’ feelings and sense of safety. It is a crucial survival instinct, since babies depend on adults for their own survival and security. They’re keenly aware of the facial expressions, tone of voice and other non-verbal signals that their caretakers are

emoting, even without directly speaking with children about the events. In times of crisis (even more than any other times), children want to know, that their caretakers can take care of them physically and emotionally and keep them safe.

- **Acknowledge your own feelings about the event.** Doing so will help you be emotionally available to your children and model to them that expression of feelings is important and does not show weakness. By sharing your feelings with children, you are also normalizing their own. When sharing your feelings with children about a tragic event try to stay as calm as you can and say: “I am feeling really sad about this event” or “I am feeling angry”. Try to avoid using words that illustrate extreme intensity such as “shocked” and “overwhelmed”.
- **Get the support you need for yourself.** If you experience overwhelming feelings of anxiety or depression, consider contacting a mental health professional or a crisis hot-line.
- **Practice self-care and seek opportunities to engage in relaxation techniques and physical exercise to release your own stress.** Remind yourself that an empty cup cannot be used to fill up other cups, so your self-care is a crucial part of your ability to care for others.
- **Remember that people are resilient.** Consider that throughout history, people have risen to meet and surmount huge challenges, and be optimistic and hopeful that this can happen with this challenge as well.

Supporting your children:

When children are scared, confused and experience stress, their autonomic nervous system can get activated resulting in children becoming more anxious, dependent, clingy, and at times regressive. Whining, crying, somatic complaints, aggressive behavior and/or toileting accidents may be their way of communicating that they need more comfort and reassurance from their caregivers. Try to be present with your children and to attune to their extreme responses as well as subtle expressions that they need more support. If behavior problems or significant behavior changes persist, seek additional resources, and consult with professionals.

- **Provide a safe place, literally, and figuratively, for your children to express their experience and their feelings about the event; acknowledge and validate their feelings.** Model this process by sharing

some of your own feelings (so long as you have them under control). Be a good listener and a good observer. Remind your children that you are there for them if they have something they want to tell you or ask. Saying that will encourage them to come to you for information rather than relay on other sources that might not be accurate or age appropriate.

- **Provide your children with opportunities to express their feelings.** Children like to express their feelings in many different ways including talking, playing, and creating art about the event. Offer a variety of modalities for children to express their feelings – art materials, musical instruments, dance & movement activities, puppets and specialty toys (such as emergency vehicles, hospital and police station). Do not press children with exploratory questions about their play or art; instead, be present as they express their inner world and reflect what they say or demonstrate.
- **Maintain routines, structures, and activities of your family life as much as possible.** Maintaining routines is reassuring and comforting for children and helps them feel a greater sense of control. Continue to set limits for your children’s behavior (especially around safety), while also tolerating and expecting some regression, distraction, or mood swings.
- **Find out what your children already know and comprehend about the event.** Ask “What have you heard?” and be on the lookout for misconceptions before answering their questions. Be sensitive to adaptations in explanations or interventions that may be required for Neurodivergent children and other special needs.
- **Provide simple, honest, concrete, age-appropriate, accurate information with respect and compassion.** Answer questions in the same manner. Use the real words: “shooting”, “someone died”, “earthquake”, etc. and avoid using euphemisms. Expect to have to repeat your explanations, at times even multiple times. The need for repetition can be a sign that a child is looking for reassurance.
- **Understand that fear and anxieties are normal reactions to this type of event.** Even if you do not feel safe, try to reassure your children that the adults are there to protect them and that everything possible is being done to keep them safe. Do not ask for or dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate your home life.

- **Watch for magical thinking and guilt and counteract it.** Explain and reassure if a child is indicating feelings of responsibility for the tragic event.
- **Limit your children’s exposure to media and news coverage of the event.** Exposure to TV, computer and radio reports about the event should be monitored and limited, as they often include highly graphic and upsetting details or images that can be extremely confusing and scary for children.
- **Put things in perspective.** Remind your children of the relative rarity of such events and focus on efforts that are being taken to prevent its reoccurrence.
- **Use this opportunity to teach and highlight the concept of community.** Discuss many of the different ways that people care for one another during difficult times. Help your children take note of and appreciate all the acts of kindness, compassion, and generosity that have followed this horrible event. It is helpful and reassuring for children to know that people in the government, the community, and the world, are working hard to keep them safe, too. Emphasize the helpers and the effort that is being done to keep everyone feeling as safe as possible by the many different types of helpers in the community: police, firefighters, doctors and nurses, teachers, rabbis, neighbors.
- **Teach self-help and coping skills.** Discuss with your children what they have done in the past to help themselves through a difficult or frightening times. Encourage use of similar strategies and offer opportunities to practice coping skills together. Sharing and modeling your own coping skills and strategies can be normalizing and very helpful for your children.
- **Focus on the positive.** Encourage your children’s individual strengths, sense of mastery, and coping strategies. Let them know that you are all working together and will continue to support each other through this difficult time.
- **Identify “child-size ways” to take action.** Help your children engage in age-appropriate, meaningful activities that reflect their interests, values, and abilities and are related to the event. For examples: writing condolences notes or notes of support to those more closely affected, contributing allowance or chore earnings to a relevant charity. Actively



Growing Minds LLC
Center for Child and Family Therapy
3204 Tower Oak Blvd. Suite 180
Rockville, MD 20850
301-235-9927
www.growingmindstherapy.org

engaging in meaningful activities related to the tragedy, can help children and adults re-establish a sense of control.