

Addressing Tragic Events with Our Children: A Q&A with Psychiatry Experts

By Michelle Brubaker | August 09, 2019

In today's world, news is easily accessible on a number of platforms with a swipe of a phone, a click of a remote or logging onto a computer. With a relentless stream of reports about natural disasters, violent attacks, crimes, shootings and accidents, it is hard to digest and process the emotions tied to breaking news headlines.

Horrific events are not only overwhelming and confusing for adults, but can cause significant anxiety and fear in children and teens. As a mom of two young children, I often worry about what they are exposed to and how to best approach the topics. How do we strike the right balance of protecting our kids from the news cycles, while promoting their awareness of the world in which we live?



A team of experts with the [Child and Teen Psychiatry Program](#) at UC San Diego Health

address this question and provide other important tips on how to communicate with kids about

tragedies, while supporting and developing their understanding of values, community and the world.

How do you recommend parents address tragic events with their children?

Hannah Sweet, MD, psychiatrist with the Child and Teen Psychiatry Program

It is important to remember that every child will respond differently. Think about your child, their age, their friend group and prior experiences. How they react will be greatly influenced by how they see others around them respond, especially you. Keep an open line of communication and encourage questions. On the other hand, if they don't want to talk, don't push them. Answer questions honestly, but at a developmentally appropriate level, and don't offer information they have not asked for.

In general, make sure your child is eating well, drinking enough water, sleeping and getting active play time. Stick to the regular routines and rules around the house. If you feel like your child is "acting out" in the context of feelings about what has happened, give them access to more positive coping skills, such as processing with a trusted adult, journaling, exercising, distraction and spending time with friends.

If your child was at a school where a threat or event occurred, make sure you normalize feelings, such as guilt, but reassure them that even though the feelings are normal, they were not at fault and did the best they could when faced with the situation. Help them identify trauma triggers and learn relaxation methods to use when triggered.

Also of critical importance, make sure that any firearms or other weapons are secured in your own home, even if your child is considered low risk. Firearms and ammunition should always be double locked separately from one another.

What is the appropriate balance between shielding your kids from information and talking to them about life-saving techniques?

Anne Bird, MBChB, psychiatrist and medical director of the Child and Teen Psychiatry Program

It is always important to monitor children exposed to specific content and to consider the child's developmental level. For example, you would talk to a teenager differently than you would to a six-year-old regarding the implications and plans around a school shooting, as well as how you would monitor the content they are exposed to.

Limiting media exposure is the best approach, and do not let young children see or hear this content. Bring up the conversation and inquire about what they already know. Provide them with the space they need to ask questions and be honest with your answers. Often children know more than we would like them to, and starting the conversation will provide you with background about their current level of knowledge and feelings around the topic, as well as communicating to them that you can have this conversation and discuss it openly. Children are often exposed to

content without the parent's knowledge, whether at a friend's house, over hearing something on the TV, radio or at school.

I would also recommend putting together a generic emergency plan (for school shootings and natural disasters) to increase their sense of control and safety should the worst case scenario become a reality.

The type and amount of news your child watches should be monitored and guided by their age, their strengths and their vulnerabilities. For age appropriate kids, sit down and watch the news with your child. Then take some time to talk with them about the stories: What did they hear? What are their fears? What questions do they have? Reassure them that you are here to keep them safe. Keep an eye out for signs that your child may be struggling with negative effects of the news, such as excessive fear or worry, trouble sleeping or emotional spells. In these circumstances, talk with your child and limit their exposure to triggering news stories.

Some schools have begun implementing active shooter drills. If you are aware a drill is approaching, you may want to introduce the conversation prior to the drill and answer any questions they might have. I would also defer to the school's plan and then add specific needs that your family may have, such as identifying a meeting place off of school grounds.

For additional information, please visit [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) .

What are signs of stress and anxiety in a child/teen and when is it time to seek professional help?

[Yuliana Noniyeva, PhD](#), psychologist with the Child and Teen Psychiatry Program

Anxiety is a broad term that can refer to different things. Sometimes people use the terms anxiety and stress to mean the same thing. The terms are not interchangeable. But chronic stress can lead to anxiety. The latest statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health show that anxiety disorders affect 1 in 8 children. Untreated, anxiety disorders put children at risk for a range of issues from poor school performance, difficulty maintaining peer relationships, sleep disturbance and possible substance abuse. Anxious feelings are part of childhood, but not all anxiety becomes an anxiety disorder.

Every child may present with a unique set of symptoms. Some signs and symptoms of stress or anxiety in children and adolescents may include:

- → Irritability, anger, or being "on edge"
- → Frequent meltdowns or temper tantrums
- → Physical complaints, such as stomach aches, headaches, that do not respond to treatment
- → Avoidance behaviors, such as avoidance of school, social events, extracurricular activities
- → Changes in appetite (either increased or decreased)

- → Changes in sleep
- → Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- → Fatigue and low energy

How parents and caregivers can help

If you suspect that your child's anxiety is mild, taking these steps may help:

- → Listen to your child's feelings and talk openly about anxiety
- → Empathize with your child
- → Plan extra time for transitions
- → Understand your child's triggers and plan ahead
- → Reduce your child's schedule to increase downtime
- → Develop and maintain a consistent, early bedtime schedule
- → Practice deep breathing exercises together
- → Work with the classroom teacher to reduce anxious feelings at school
- → Resist the urge to dismiss or downplay worries
- → Create a stress-free zone in the home, and stock it with relaxing activities, such as coloring books, stress balls, Play-Doh and soothing music

If your child experiences symptoms of anxiety for a period of two weeks or more that interfere with his or her normal daily living, this may be an indication to seek an evaluation from a licensed mental health provider.

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