



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Uniformed Services University's Department of Psychiatry, located in Bethesda, Maryland, and a partnering center of the Defense Center of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury.

## Restoring a Sense of Safety in the Aftermath of a Mass Shooting: Tips for Parents and Professionals

Too often our children are exposed to violence that is both senseless and harmful. Many children, those living in close proximity to a tragic event, and those who will learn about the event through television, social media, or newspaper coverage, will be affected and upset. The timing of this tragedy — the holiday season — makes this Connecticut school shooting even more upsetting. Many children will soon be on school holidays putting additional responsibility on parents and caregivers to reassure children who may know about or ask questions around this event.

### Communicate effectively with your children

A high profile event of this magnitude can result in confusion and distress among communities across the country. Distress can result in distortion about the facts of the event. Therefore, special attention should be given when communicating with children and adolescents.

- When speaking with your children, it is best to use communication that is factual, simple, clear and sensitively worded.
- Don't overwhelm young children with too much information. They might want to talk intermittently or might need concrete information to be repeated.
- Use language that is appropriate to your child's age.
- Young children sometimes exhibit "magical thinking" which might lead them to believe they are responsible for what happened.
- Children may have ideas or beliefs that are difficult to know unless you *ask them*.
- Adults can encourage children to talk, but should respect their wishes when they may not want to.
- Ensure that your children are not exposed to media reports about the event that are repetitive, confusing, or frightening.

### Physical safety and security always take priority

It is difficult to predict children's reactions to learning about these types of events and whether children's immediate reactions will lead to sustained psychological problems.

- Common posttraumatic responses in children include:

nightmares or fears related to the trauma, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, and repetitive play that mimics the trauma.

- While symptoms are often transient, they should be clinically treated if they persist. If you have questions contact your child's health care or behavioral health care provider to seek advice or guidance.
- Some children may act out as a reaction. Talk to your child about what is troubling them and do not punish or reprimand them.

### Answers to some common questions

Below are some common questions and answers to help guide caregivers addressing a confusing or senseless act of mass violence with children and adolescents:

#### *Why do these things happen?*

Children, like adults, often want to know the motives of people responsible for these horrible events. Past events have resulted from many causes including mental illness, rage, extreme political or religious beliefs, and frank hatred. Unfortunately, we usually can't be sure what led a specific individual acting in such a way. It does not help children to have them fear groups of people who fall into any specific demographic categories. Doing so only leads to discrimination, stigma, and victimization of people who also are struggling to cope with these events. More importantly, help your children understand that adults, including government authorities work hard to identify and stop dangerous events before they even happen.

#### *Will this happen again and how do I keep my children safe?*

Unfortunately, violent events are likely to occur in the future. It is important to remember that despite our awareness, random violence occurs rarely and does not occur in most neighborhoods. Remember that parents and professionals strive to keep our children safe yet allow them the space they need to grow and develop. Use the following guidelines:

- know your children's whereabouts, who they are with and when they are to return home

- set clear and consistent curfews
- have a clear method of communication in normal and emergency situations (e.g. cell phone)
- educate them about places or situations that are more likely to put them in danger and teach them to avoid high-risk exposures
- monitor federal and local advise about risks that might surface
- be vigilant about safety in your community
- strive to keep open communication with children and adolescents

### **How does one plan for this type of emergency?**

Discuss hypothetical emergency situations with your children and calmly talk with them about what they can do to keep themselves safe when danger presents itself. Instruct them to trust and seek help from police and other authorities who are likely to be on the scene quickly. Always encourage your children to say something when they see something suspicious. Establishing a communication plan for locating family members can help to reduce anxiety. Parents should know where their children are and children should tell parents when they have changed their location.

### **Is my child okay?**

Children will show a wide variety of reactions. There is no “normal” reaction to stressful events. Some reactions include tearfulness, separation or bedtime anxiety, or regression in behaviors. More severe reactions may include reliving the trauma through dreams, emotional numbness, increased startle responses, withdrawal or physical symptoms like racing heartbeat, nausea or change in appetite.

These types of events, while tragic, can sometimes lead to positive opportunities. They become opportunities to open, or reopen, channels of communication among family members. They may provide us opportunities to appreciate each other more and to express our love for one another. They may provide opportunities for families to better plan how they will cope with future difficult times or topics. It is important to focus on what might positively emerge from these tragic events while we also acknowledge tragic losses.

### **Online Resources**

If you have any questions about your child’s health or response to a traumatic event you can seek professional advice from a community primary care or behavioral care provider or review additional resources at the following sites:

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
 National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
 American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
 American Academy of Pediatrics  
 American Psychiatric Association  
 American Psychological Association  
 American Red Cross

[www.cstsonline.org](http://www.cstsonline.org)  
[www.ncstn.org](http://www.ncstn.org)  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)



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