

Talking to Children about Mass Violence

The recent stabbing has evoked many emotions—anxiety, helplessness, worry, anger, and sadness. Schools are supposed to be one of the safe places, where children go to learn and be with friends. Children and teens who are struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the stabbing may turn to trusted adults for help and guidance. Reinforcing safety issues is important. They need to hear that their parents/caregivers, school staff, and the community will do everything they can to keep them safe.

Here are some helpful tips:

- *Start the conversation.* Talk honestly about the incident with your child. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening in your child’s mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible even to speak about or that you do not know what has happened. With social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, newsbreaks on favorite radio and TV stations, and others), it is highly unlikely that children and teenagers have not heard about this.
- *What does your child already know?* Start by asking what your child/teen already has heard about the events from the media and from friends. Listen carefully; try to figure out what he or she knows or believes. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will change as more facts about the event are known.
- *Gently correct inaccurate information.* If your child/teen has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to provide the correct information in simple, clear, age-appropriate language.
- *Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.* Your child/teen may have some difficult questions about the incident. For example, she may ask if it is possible that it could happen at their school; she is probably really asking whether it is “likely.” The concern about re-occurrence will be an issue for caregivers and children/teens alike. While it is important to discuss the likelihood of this risk, she is also asking if she is safe. This may be a time to review plans your family has for keeping safe in the event of *any* crisis situation. Do give any information you have on the support the victims and their families are receiving. Let her know that the person responsible is under arrest and cannot hurt anyone else. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation when they have the facts about it. Having question-and-answer talks gives your child ongoing support as he or she begins to cope with the range of emotions stirred up by this event.
- *Limit media exposure.* Limit your child’s exposure to media images of the stabbing, and *do not allow your very young children to see or hear any TV/radio stabbing-related messages.* Remember what may not be upsetting to an adult may be very upsetting and confusing for a child or teen. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage of this stabbing. If your child has watched coverage, take a minute to turn off the television and ask the child about what they think about what was seen. This also gives you an opportunity to discuss the event and gently correct misperceptions.

- Common reactions. Children/Teens may have reactions to this event. In the immediate aftermath, they may have more problems paying attention and concentrating. They may become more irritable or defiant. Children and even teens may have trouble separating from caregivers, wanting to stay at home or close by them. It's common for young people to feel anxious about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how it will impact their lives. Their sleep and appetite routines may change. In general, you should see these reactions lessen within a few weeks.
- Be a positive role model. Consider sharing your feelings about the incident with your child/teen, but at a level they can understand. You may express sadness and empathy for the victims and their families. You may share some worry, but it is important to also share ideas for coping with difficult situations like this event. Remind them that if they are concerned about any of their friends or classmates to tell you or another trusted adult.
- Be patient. In times of stress, children/teens may have trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. While they may not openly ask for your guidance or support, they will want it. Both children and teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself, too!).
- Extra help. Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children's/teens' abilities to function or if you are worried, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Contact your family physician, pediatrician, or state mental health associations for referrals to such experts.

NOTE: Children/teens who were present at the school, knew those directly affected, or have experienced similar incidents will need more support in the days and weeks ahead.