

Helping Your Children Feel Safe After a Horrific Event

Denver Children's Advocacy Center



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Last week, just one day before the anniversary of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, an 18-year-old teenager opened fire in Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado, critically injuring a fellow student before taking his own life. For a community still traumatized by the incidents at Sandy Hook, not to mention the Century Movie Theater in Aurora in 2012 and Columbine High School in 1999, this can be understandably overwhelming.

These situations occurred in environments that had been associated with safety and trust, and now something scary and unsafe has altered that perception. These events have evoked many strong emotions – anger, sadness, fear, disgust, helplessness, anxiety – not only for those individuals directly impacted, but also for those who have been exposed through relational associations, or simply media exposure.

It is natural for children and teens to seek out adults to help them process these types of experiences. This presents a unique challenge to parents and teacher because just as the youth are attempting to organize their thoughts, cope with their feelings and make some meaning of these events, the adults are engaged in the same process.

I have received many requests from parents and the media asking questions about how to talk with children about these terrible events without increasing the children's anxiety and fears about the world. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network offers some good guidelines to answer this difficult question:

Suggestions for Adults

- Take care of yourself. Do your best to drink plenty of water, eat regularly, and get enough sleep and exercise.
- Help each other. Take time with other adult relatives, friends, or members of the community to talk or support each other.
- Put off major decisions. Avoid making unnecessary life-altering decisions during this time.
- Give yourself a break. Take time to rest and do things that you like to do.

Things to Do for Children

- Spend time talking with your children. Let them know that it is OK to ask questions and express their concerns and feelings. You should remain open to answering new questions and providing information and support. You might not know all the answers and it is OK to say that. At the same time, don't push teens to talk if they don't want to. Let them know you are available when they are ready.
- Find time to have these conversations. Use time such as when you eat together or sit together in the evening to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Try not to have these conversations at bedtime, as this is the time for resting.
- What does your child already know? Start by asking what your children already know and think about what they have read, heard or experienced. Listen carefully in an accepting

and non-judgmental manner. As children express their thoughts and beliefs listen for misperceptions and misinformation. Be attuned to how their perceptions are making them feel and validate those experiences before providing information to correct them. Say something like "This really scared you! I can see the way you are thinking about this made you feel that way." Then respectfully correct their inaccurate information. Provide this new information in a simple, clear and age-appropriate manner.

- Help your children feel safe. Talk with them about their concerns over safety and discuss changes that are occurring in the community to promote safety. Encourage them to voice their concerns to you or to teachers at school.
- Maintain expectations or "rules." Stick with family rules, such as curfews, checking in with you while with friends, and keeping up with homework and chores. On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where they are going and what they are planning to do to monitor how they are doing. Assure them that the extra check-in is temporary, just until things stabilize.
- Address acting out behaviors. Help them understand that acting out behaviors are a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger and grief) over what happened (e.g., cutting, driving recklessly, engaging in unprotected sex, abusing drugs or alcohol). You can say, "Many of us feel out of control and angry right now. Some people may think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It's very normal to feel that way - but it's not a good idea to act on it." Talk about other ways of coping with these feelings (distraction, exercise, writing in a journal, spending time with others).
- Limit media exposure. Protect them from too much media coverage, including on the Internet, radio, television, or other technologies (e.g., texting, Facebook, Twitter). Explain that media coverage and social media technologies can spread rumors and trigger fears about the event happening again.
- Be patient. Children and teens may be more distracted and need added help with chores or homework once school is in session. It is normal for all humans to have a stress response to any potential threat in the environment. Reactions such as increased startle responses, increased emotional reactions, anxiety, decreased attention span, intrusive thoughts and disrupted sleep may be present for the first month after the exposure. For most people in the community these reactions lessen and we are able to re-establish our equilibrium after about one month. For individuals more directly impacted this time period can be extended due to continued exposure to reminders of the events and more complicated feeling of loss and grief.
- Ask for professional help. If the reactions continue or the family feels unable to manage the situation due to overwhelming emotions or lack of knowledge and support, contact a professional to assist you and the family through this experience.

Children are dependent upon their caregivers to help them feel safe and create meaning of experiences in their world. The adolescent is in the process of transferring dependency needs from the parents to peers and possible romantic partners. How a child and the adolescent processes these types of experiences is greatly influenced by the nature, quantity and quality of the interactions they have with the significant adults and peers in their lives. A well-regulated, attentive, responsive parent can help the child re-establish a sense of safety and security and manage distressing emotions. The child, within this protective relational nest, and the adolescent within their relational network can learn that at times bad things happen, to good people, in basically a good world.