

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT TRAGIC EVENTS



If you're an adult wondering how to talk with children about tragic events such as natural disasters, school shootings, or plane crashes, here are some tips to keep in mind.

Take a moment to ground yourself before these conversations.

Children take their cues from the adults around them, so this can help you in not protecting your fears onto them. The outpouring of care and empathy for the families who are grieving will be powerful, and it's | hard not to imagine how it could have been our friends, child, family, or community members who died or were injured.

Identifying with the senselessness and randomness makes us all feel more vulnerable. But we should remember that children don't always see things the same way that adults do. It's okay to show emotion. We can model for children that feeling sad, scared, and upset is normal after tragedies. But we don't want to overwhelm them with our emotions, or put them in the position of having to 'parent,' or take care of, the adults around them. Make sure you also model taking care of yourself, by sharing with trusted and supportive adult friends, eating (and drinking) healthfully.

Try to limit their access to the recurring news and exposure to the tragedy.

Over-exposure to the news can be overwhelming for children and can cause unnecessary anxiety and fear. Some children (and some adults) may have difficulty getting graphic scenes and images out of their minds. Too much exposure can fuel their fear, so don't let them sit and watch the news over and over. Better yet, set the example of not doing so yourself as well.

Understand that you can't completely shield children from what happened.

It would be next to impossible to hide these events from children, as much as we wish we could. You might be able to temporarily shield your child in your own home if you don't turn on the news, or if they don't have access to screens and devices, but you can't protect them from hearing about it from their peers or others in the community. The fact is, they will hear about it, so although they don't "need" to know about it, pretending we can shield them is magical thinking.

That said, you don't need to give them more information than they're asking for. A simple, "What have you heard _____?" can be a good place to start. They need to know that you're not trying to hide the truth from them, that you're open to talking about it, but that you're also not forcing them to do so.

Model truth-telling and build trust with your children.

In the more than 40 years of providing grief support to thousands of children and teens at Dougy Center, we have never heard a child say, "I'm glad I was lied to." Many, however, struggle with anger and lack of trust toward parents or other adults who lied to them. When we don't tell the truth, they learn that we cannot be trusted. As difficult as it can be at times, and as hard as the truth may be, children want, need, and deserve the truth. Being able to talk openly and honestly with your children about tragic events and other losses, creates



a foundation of trust, enabling them to come to you in the future with their questions, fears, and concerns.

There is no one typical reaction one can or should expect from children.

Their responses might be all over the map, from intense emotional, physical, or behavioral reactions to seemingly no reaction at all. How any specific child will respond will depend on their age, previous experience with death and loss, and their personality style. Children who are directly affected — those who had a family member die, witnessed the tragedy, or had friends die — may have longer-term grief responses and needs. While it would be normal to have heightened anxiety and sleeplessness, any concerning behavior or troubling symptoms should be taken seriously, and if warranted, professional help sought.

Many children will have an increased sense of fear about their safety.

Understandably. So will many adults. While we can't guarantee to our children that nothing bad will ever happen to them, we can provide assurance that

these events are relatively rare, and that we will do everything we can to keep them safe. Children may have many questions about the events, particularly about natural disasters. Answer their questions with language that fits their developmental stage. It's okay if you don't know the answer to a question. If it's a question that might have an answer, offer to look up more information. You can also ask children what they think the answer is as they often have thoughts and ideas they want to share with you. In the case of natural disasters, if your child is fearful of something like that happening in your community, talk with them about the safety plan that you have in place for your family and home. You can also look into what community safety measures are in place and whatever elements are relevant with your children. Many children will be reassured knowing that there are specific, tangible things they and your family can do if something occurs. Some examples include, picking a meeting place, keeping flashlights in every bedroom, talking about where you will keep emergency water and food.

For additional support and resources, visit dougycenter.org.



**The National Grief Center
for Children & Families**

Dougycenter Bookstore/Resources

Dougycenter's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougycenter participants. To order online, visit dougycenter.org or dougycenterbookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougycenter

Founded in 1982, Dougycenter provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougycenter provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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