



COMMUNICATING WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN REGARDING MASS SHOOTINGS

Parents, school nurses, and mental health nurses are some of the first people who may talk to a child after a mass shooting event. Children of different ages process information differently and will be emotionally affected to varying degrees.

Before beginning the conversation, determine what you want the child to take away from the conversation. Some things to consider are their family values, how to assure them they will be safe, and emphasizing your willingness to talk and listen to their concerns, worries, and fears. Be sure to stress the positives, such as people (police, first responders) who willingly go into dangerous situations to help others.

Kindergarten

- Determine what you want the child to take away from talk.
- Ask what they know, have seen, or have heard.
- Keep it simple; stick to a one-sentence story.
- Focus on the positives, such as the heroes of the story.

Elementary

- Know this age group will have more questions.
- Limit repeated media reviews of incident and over-exposure.
- Plan family activities, such as game night.
- Focus on first responders and onsite helpers.

Tweens

- Allow and encourage expressions of feelings, emotions, and fears.
- Listen without commentary.
- Ask how they are doing.
- Parents: share your beliefs with them.

Teens

- May want to discuss solutions and ask what you or adults are going to do.
- Have them share their ideas and thoughts regarding resolution for their community.
- Allow them to share feelings without judgement.
- Be empathetic.

Adults speaking with children should remain calm. Let children see you upset and show emotion, but step away if you are too distraught. Get on the same eye level as children when talking to them. Encourage them to use words to share their thoughts, and avoid placing blame while acknowledging that sometimes people hurt others.

Children process and respond to trauma differently depending on their age. Avoid criticizing their behaviors and responses. Instead work with them to discuss their emotional stress.

Possible Responses and Reactions

- Preschool
 - Clinging
 - Bed wetting
 - Thumb sucking
 - Regressive behaviors
- Elementary to early middle
 - Fear of going to school
 - Trouble sleeping
 - Decreased attention span or ability to focus
 - Aggression
- Upper middle school to high school
 - Easily upset or angry
 - Complaints of aches and pains in absence of known injury or illness
 - Argumentative
 - Resisting authority
 - Trouble sleeping
 - Signs of depression

Parents need to remember these are normal reactions to situations such as this. However, if behaviors persist for more than two to four weeks, children may need help with coping strategies or parents may need to seek assistance from a mental health professional.

For more information:

- [Today interview with Dr. Deborah Gilboa](#)
- [Talking to Children about the Shooting](#) – National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- [School Shootings and Other Traumatic Events: How to Talk to Students](#) – National Education Association