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An Age-by-Age Guide to Talking to Children About Mass Shootings



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A devastating reality of raising children in America today is that parents must be prepared to talk to their kids about mass shootings.

It's a wrenching task, and experts say there are some universal best practices — like avoiding graphic details. Or doing your best to actively listen, rather than trying to take away children's pain.

But the particulars of what families discuss — and how parents respond to questions and concerns — depend a lot on children's age and development. A 5-year-old will have a very different understanding of an act of mass violence than a 15-year-old will.

The New York Times spoke with several mental health experts about some basic principles for parents and caregivers to have in mind when talking with children of all ages in the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting.

Preschoolers and early elementary schoolers

With children this young, arguably the biggest question is whether to talk about the tragedy at all. Much of the answer comes down to whether you think they are likely to learn about it elsewhere, say from a classmate, an older sibling or on the news.

Your personal parental values also come into play.

“Some parents believe that even young children should know what is happening in the world — which has merit,” Steven Meyers, a professor of psychology at Roosevelt University in Illinois, said. “Other parents will want to shield their children as long as they can. There is merit to that approach as well.”

If you decide to discuss the shooting with your preschooler or kindergartner, your primary goals are twofold: Offer very simple information, and give ample reassurance that close adults are there for support and protection.

Dr. David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement and a clinician who has spent years working directly with communities in the wake of mass shootings, suggests parents say something like: I want to let you know that in a school that is hours away from us, there was a person who shot some children and adults, and a lot of people are sad. Noting where the school is can help provide some basic context about how the shooting affects them.

Help children name their emotions. For example, Dr. Meyers said, a 4-year-old might say something like, “I feel bad.” Help children unpack that feeling. Does “bad” mean sad? Angry? Frightened? Learning how to label big feelings is a bedrock emotional skill that develops with age and practice.

Older elementary school children

For children in this age group, start by asking what, if anything, they know about the event. Depending on when you speak with them, they may have already learned about the shooting from a classmate or some other source.

“You’re listening to how much they know,” Dr. Harold Koplewicz, president of the Child Mind Institute, said. “And then you’re telling them the facts of the case in a very calm, informational way. You are not sharing unnecessary details.”

Make sure to ask what questions they have, if any. If they have none, that is OK. In fact, Dr. Schonfeld said, “the most common reaction is no reaction.” Simply reassure your child that you are available if and when there are questions down the road.

But if children have questions, be careful not to provide too much detail at once.

“If they ask rapid questions, you slow it down. Because oftentimes kids don’t want as much information as they’re asking for, so you give them small pieces,” Dr. Koplewicz said, adding that if you don’t know an answer or simply want more time to think about it, say that.

Keep in mind that children of all ages, but perhaps particularly elementary-school age, tend to focus inward. So they may immediately jump to how the news applies to themselves.

“Be reassuring and say: ‘Let’s think about what’s going on in your school. What are the safety measures and precautions?’” Dr. Koplewicz said. “And the other piece of information that’s reassuring is how rare these events are. They’re horrific, but they’re still rare.”

Tweens

If you have an adolescent, it is safe to assume your child has already heard the news or will soon, regardless of whether you bring it up. So again, start with questions about what your child knows and how they feel. Your primary goal is to be open to what your child says, not to try to fix anything.

“The key is to listen to their account of the situation, to be very judicious as to when you interrupt them, to focus on feelings and then to move into correcting misperceptions and providing reassurance,” Dr. Meyers said. “But the goal for all parents is to essentially drain the well of emotions by virtue of their sensitive listening.”

Keep in mind that all of the emotional confusion of adolescence could rear its head, and your tween may need some reassurance that feelings are meant to be felt.

“They’re testing the waters in a lot of ways. Like, ‘Does crying make you a baby?’ Or, ‘Is crying a normal reaction when the world is scary and hard?’” said Dr. Jessi Gold, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

So your tween might want to lean on you emotionally but also feel conflicted about it. Reassure your child that it is OK to draw support from others in times of tragedy and that doing so doesn’t mean in any way sacrificing budding independence, Dr. Gold said.

Teens

Again, the same basic advice holds: Lead with questions and focus on active listening. But with older children, you can be more forthright about your own emotions and response to the news, Dr. Koplewicz said.

“We can be angry, we can be super disgusted, we can be upset. We can even be tearful,” he said. “There’s nothing wrong with showing emotions to your kid.” But you want to model positive ways of coping with those emotions, he added.

While some teenagers might welcome an opportunity to discuss their feelings and yours, others might not want to talk about them at all. Your goal is to be respectful while not “meeting avoidance with avoidance,” Dr. Gold said.

If they shy away from the conversation, let them know you're around whenever they want to talk, Dr. Gold said. She recommended asking outright how your teenager would prefer for you to check in. Would tomorrow be OK? What's a way you could ask that would not be intrusive or annoying?

"Give them ownership of their own feelings and their own processing," Dr. Gold said.

For teenagers in particular, taking action can be a helpful antidote to feelings of helplessness. Talk to yours about volunteering, writing letters, donating money or just learning more about a particular topic or problem, which can be its own form of action. Even elementary school children and tweens can participate.

"Advocacy is a mature coping mechanism," Dr. Gold said.

Know your child

Every expert interviewed for this story emphasized that it is important for parents to tap into what they know about their own children: How do they typically process difficult emotions? How much access do they have to screens and social media? What is your sense of their baseline emotional well-being?

Children with underlying anxiety or a history of trauma may have more difficulty coping, so "monitor your child," Dr. Meyers said. Look for signs like sleep problems, changes in behavior (such as withdrawing or becoming clingy) or physical complaints. Dr. Schonfeld also noted that children are sometimes ready to talk about a seemingly unrelated loss after an event like a mass shooting, such as the death of a loved one.

There are many resources available to parents and families. The American Academy of Pediatrics and National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement offer guidance for helping children in the aftermath of a shooting. The Child Mind Institute has a nondiagnostic symptom checker that can be useful for parents who have concerns that their child is struggling.

And make sure you are giving yourself time and space to process your own emotions.

"You don't want your anxiety to become your kid's anxiety," Dr. Koplewicz said.

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