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15 Tips for Talking with Children About School Violence

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As families and educators begin to respond to children's questions about the school shooting in Connecticut, many adults have questions about how to help children cope with the tragedy. Some adults may wonder how much information children should be exposed to, or what to say to reassure their children about their safety. Others may look for ideas on what to say when children ask why this tragedy happened or how they can help people who have been affected.

Organizations around the country are pulling together their resources to provide some guidance and many of these organizations are publishing materials in multiple languages. Here are some tips for getting started, as well as additional recommended resources.

Note: Many of these suggestions originally appeared in [Fred Rogers Talks About Tragic Events in the News](#) (also available [in Spanish](#)).

Talking with children about tragedy in the news

- **First, find out what your child or student knows about the event.** Even if you haven't yet discussed it together, the child may have heard the news from media sources or classmates. The child's perception of what has happened may be very different from the reality.
- **Reassure the child that it's ok to talk about sad or scary events.** It's also ok to admit to feeling sad, scared, or angry and to acknowledge that you are having those feelings too. In an interview with *Good Morning America*, expert Willow Bay advises, "Establish that there is no question too scary for your child to talk about." Likewise, Mr. Rogers writes, "If we don't let children know it's okay to feel sad and scared, they may think something is wrong with them when they do feel that way."

- **Encourage questions, both now and in the future.** David Schonfeld, MD, writes, “Like adults, children are better able to cope with a crisis if they feel they understand it. Question-and-answer exchanges provide you with the opportunity to offer support as your child begins to understand the crisis and the response to it.”
- **Reassure the child that he or she is safe.** When a child has questions such as, “Why did this happen?” or “Am I safe?”, explain that events like these are very rare. Ms. Bay also encourages parents to talk about the many people who work every day to keep kids safe, such as police officers, teachers, or the school principal.
- **In sharing information, be honest, but be mindful of the child’s age.** The National Association of School Psychologists offers these helpful guidelines in its tips for talking with children about violence (available in multiple languages):
 - **“Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
 - **“Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
 - **“Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by students or community members, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs.”
- **Remember that it’s ok to admit that you don’t have all of the answers.** Mr. Rogers offers the following : “If the answer is ‘I don't know,’ then the simplest reply might be something like, ‘I'm sad about the news, and I'm worried. But I love you, and I'm here to care for you.’”
- **Be patient.** If the child doesn’t have much to say yet, give him some time and let him know that it’s ok to come back with more questions or to talk about the events when he’s ready. If he shows signs of depression and anxiety over time, speak with the child’s pediatrician or a counselor for guidance.

Other important steps

- **Encourage the child to express feelings and ideas through familiar activities.** Professor Bonnie Rubenstein recommends writing, painting, and singing. Play may also be helpful, but Mr. Rogers encourages adults to help children come up with “safe” make-believe scenarios such as helping someone at a hospital rather than reenacting the tragedy.
- **Turn off the news.** Media images can add to the trauma of a tragedy, particularly for young children. Images on the television, in video, and on the Internet can be confusing and disorienting as dramatic images are repeated over and over again. Mr. Rogers notes that “Someone who has died turns up alive and then dies again and again,” while Dr. Elaine Ducharme explains that this can lead children to believe that the tragedy has happened many times. In addition, the live coverage and the closeness of the TV images can add to the sense of danger. If the child does see these images, help her understand that she is far away from where the news has happened.
- **Look for “kid-friendly” sources of information.** These might include children’s books, magazines and websites for children who want to learn more. For more information about using children’s literature, see [After the Crisis: Using Storybooks to Help Children Cope](#). News websites for kids below are listed below.
- **Talk about people who are helping.** Mr. Rogers notes that whenever his family learned about bad news, his mother encouraged him to “look for the helpers.” These may include first responders, volunteers, doctors, or community members. Let your child know that even though bad things happen, the world has many good people who want to help.
- **Ask the child for ideas on how to help.** This might include fundraising, collecting donations, or being pen pals, as well as ways to make a difference closer to home through a community project. Mr. Rogers also suggests talking about ways that adults can help, such as making a donation or writing a letter to an elected official.
- **Keep up your routine.** Normalcy will help the child deal with difficult feelings, as will doing fun things that you both enjoy. Remember that kids still need to be kids!
- **Stay calm.** OneToughJob.com emphasizes how important it is for adults to manage their own stress so that they can be the best caregivers possible – and to also remember that children may be listening to adult conversations.

- **Get close!** A final tip from Mr. Rogers: “Give your child extra comfort and physical affection, like hugs or snuggling up together with a favorite book. Physical comfort goes a long way towards providing inner security. That closeness can nourish you, too.”

Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers

The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a number of helping tips in how to talk to children about violence and safety in this tip sheet, also available in multiple languages.

English	Spanish
Korean	Vietnamese
French	Amharic
Chinese	Portuguese

Recommended Resources

News websites for kids

- [Time for Kids](#)
- [What to Do When the News Is Sad](#) (Time for Kids)
- [CNN Student News](#)
- [Scholastic News](#)

Talking about the Connecticut shooting

- [How to Talk to Your Kids about the Connecticut Shooting](#) (ABC News)
- [How to Talk with Children about Connecticut School Shooting](#) (American Federation of Teachers)
- [Tips for Talking to Children about the Connecticut School Shooting](#) (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)
- [In the Wake of Newtown, Helping Children Cope](#) (*Education Week*)

Talking about school violence

- [Helping Your Children Manage Distress in the Aftermath of a Shooting](#) (American Psychologists Association)
- [Restoring a Sense of Safety in the Aftermath of a Mass Shooting](#) (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)
- [Coping with a School Shooting](#) (National Association for the Education of Young Children)
- [Mass Violence Resources](#) (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

Talking about tough topics

- [Public Media's Role in Times of Tragedy](#) (Resources from PBS Parents and Sesame Street)
- [Parenting for a Challenging World: Recovery After a Traumatic Event](#) (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)
- [Help in the Times of Crisis or Loss](#) (National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement)
- [Talking About Tragic Events](#) (One Tough Job)

Talking about tough topics: Multilingual resources

Spanish language

- [How to Talk with Children about Connecticut School Shooting](#) (American Federation of Teachers)
- [Helping your children manage distress in the aftermath of a shooting](#) (American Psychologists Association)
- [Helping Children Cope with Trauma](#) (Red Cross)
- [Parent and Educator Tips for Talking with Children About Violence](#) (National Association of School Psychologists)
- [Helping Children After a Tragedy](#) (CNN Mexico)

Other languages

- [Helping Children Cope with Disaster: Multilingual](#) (Red Cross – see bottom of page)
- [Parent and Educator Tips for Talking with Children About Violence: Multilingual](#) (National Association of School Psychologists)

School safety

- [Parent Guides on School Violence](#) (National PTA)
- [Tips for School Administrators for Reinforcing School Safety](#) (National Association of School Psychologists)
- [Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide](#) (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice and the American Institutes for Research)
- [Guidelines for Responding to a School Crisis](#) (American Federation of Teachers)
- [Dealing with Incidences of School Violence](#) (American Federation of Teachers)
- [Understanding School Violence](#) (The Centers for Disease Control)
- [School Violence Prevention and Intervention](#) (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice)
- [School Violence and Security: A Historical Timeline](#) (*Education Week*)

Educational resources

- [Student and Teacher Resources & Forums on the Newtown, Conn. Shootings](#) (*The New York Times*)
- [Ongoing News Coverage](#) of Sandy Hook Shootings (*Education Week*)

About the Author

[Lydia Breiseth](#) is the Manager of Colorín Colorado, which is a part of the Learning Media Department of public broadcasting affiliate WETA. In this capacity, Ms. Breiseth manages content, web production, outreach, and partnerships on behalf of the project.

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<http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/55323/>

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