

Tips to help kids cope following tragic news events

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(Medical Xpress)—The mass-shooting tragedy in Newtown, Conn., raises many questions: How do you talk to your children about such a horrendous event? Is there an age that's too early to have this discussion?

Joshua Kellman, MD, clinical associate of psychiatry at the University of Chicago Medicine's Section of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, provided these tips for adults as they contemplate what to say to their children. [Parents](#) are encouraged to call their child's [pediatrician](#) or other health professional for more information.

Talking about painful or [traumatic events](#) in the world with children can be difficult but sometimes very beneficial. There are two important variables to take into account: the age (or more precisely, the developmental level) of the child, and where the child specifically is, in his or her thinking about the event.

Listen to Your Child

As with all children, especially with younger children, it is important not to impose our own adult concerns or reactions on the child, but instead to respond to the child's concerns. First and foremost, this involves listening to the child. When it comes to events like this morning's [school shooting](#), parents are advised to be attuned to what, if anything, the child has heard or seen about the event.

If the child appears not to know about the scary incident, there is no need to impose it on the child. If the child is aware of it, listen to what he or she says about it and get a feel for how much the child understands about what happened.

Be Direct and Sensitive to Age

If the child has questions, answer those in a direct and straightforward way. But answer them at the level from which the child is asking them. For example, if an 8-year-old asks, "Why would someone do that?" a simple explanation such as, 'Sometimes something goes wrong with people and they are not thinking right,' should suffice.

Be Reassuring

Given that this happened in a school, children may express concerns about their own safety. Acknowledge and address their concerns, but reassure them that they are safe because school shootings, as horrendous as they can be, are statistically improbable. (It is much more likely that their safety would be compromised by many everyday activities, such as getting in a car.)

Limit Preschoolers' Exposure

Ideally, preschool-aged children should not be exposed to information about such events. Distress in a preschooler is much more likely to be acted out behaviorally with irritability, difficult behavior, tantrums, or regression to earlier levels of functioning than it is to be articulated verbally. Parents should be as reassuring and close as possible if the [child](#) appears distressed by the event. If the preschooler has questions, they should be answered in the simplest terms with reassurance of their own safety and that of those close to them.

Allow for Expression in Older Kids

School-age children are clearly more capable of understanding what happened at a verbal level. If they are concerned or distressed by what they have been exposed to, a more extensive discussion about what they are struggling with may be appropriate. Language is probably the best tool we humans have to deal with difficult feeling states. When we can put what's bothering us into words—even if that doesn't make it go away—our distress can become more manageable.

For adolescents, who are capable of thinking at a more abstract level, issues of death need not be avoided, even though reassurance of the statistical likelihood of safety is still justified. With more sophisticated teenagers, if they are thinking about a tragic event, discussing how we regulate our society (for example, how we balance personal freedoms with gun control) may be appropriate.

Don't Ignore Your Feelings

Finally, as parents, teachers, doctors or other [adults](#) who interact with children, we are all vulnerable to being overtaken by our own feelings in response to a traumatic situation such as this. There is little to be gained by stoic efforts to suppress our true emotions while talking to children about it. This is what emotions are for. [Children](#) need not be overwhelmed or traumatized by difficult emotions if we model our own acceptance and tolerance of them.

Provided by University of Chicago Medical Center

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