

# How to talk with kids about traumatic events

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This past spring, some New Jersey teachers self-reported a marked increase in worrisome behavior among students in grades 5 through 12, reflecting the findings in a nationwide survey. Credit: Rutgers University

When terrible events, such as the terrorist events days ago in New York and New Jersey, following the attacks in Nice, France, and Orlando, Florida, occur, children and adolescents can become emotionally unsettled.

News reports, conversations between adults overheard and law enforcement activities witnessed firsthand, can impact youngsters' attitudes, thoughts and behavior to the point that professional

intervention may be needed, according to Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth (TLC), New Jersey's primary youth suicide prevention program at Rutgers' University Behavioral Health Care. TLC is funded by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, Division of Family and Community Partnerships, Office of School Linked Services.

TLC, supported by a coordinator in each county of New Jersey, is often called upon by local school districts to lend support or take the lead role in response to a crisis. This past spring, some New Jersey teachers self-reported a marked increase in worrisome behavior among students in grades 5 through 12: meltdowns, panic attacks, sleep disturbances, nightmares and regression in development behavior. This is a reflection of a nationwide survey, conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, asking approximately 2,000 teachers how the presidential campaign was affecting their students and their teaching. The results indicated that the campaign is having a profoundly negative impact on schoolchildren across the country, producing an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom.

"Children of all ages are reacting as if they have experienced a traumatic event. Some would say they have," said Maureen Brogan, TLC statewide coordinator.

Rutgers Today spoke with Brogan about how parents and educators can help children maintain or regain their sense of safety and security, particularly following violent tragedies such as those that have occurred in recent months.

**How should parents react to violence being reported by the news media as their children are watching?**

Brogan: Breaking news could raise the level of anxiety and concern unnecessarily. What is important to remember at all times is that children look to adults for their reactions. They are very attuned. If we abruptly say 'turn off the news,' they may think things are very bad. Instead, we should talk about the news with them. When breaking news is being reported, some details are often sketchy and some reporting may not be accurate. We should explain that and try to give some perspective. It is also an opportunity to teach children about reliable news sources and help them separate what is fact from what is opinion, since it can be difficult for them to distinguish between the two.



Maureen Brogan, statewide coordinator, Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth at Rutgers, says rather than pretending to understand why violence is occurring, adults should explain to youngsters that individuals who carry out violence are troubled and unable to think clearly about how to deal with their feelings and

problems. Credit: Rutgers University

For older youngsters, it often helps if we guide their thinking. If parents and educators regularly discuss current events, then, when a tragic event occurs, they will be more accustomed to talking about it and will understand it better.

## **How should we explain why violence is occurring?**

Brogan: Don't pretend to understand why violence is occurring. It's okay to say, 'Honestly I do not know why this is happening now.' But explain that it is clear that whoever carried out the violence are troubled individuals unable to think clearly about how to deal with their feelings and problems, that unfortunately they were unable to control their impulses or urges to hurt others. It's a time when you can explain that most people do not act that way and to try to make children understand the good things people do and how a community comes together to help one another during a tragedy and its aftermath.

## **What are some of the more recognizable warning signs from a child emotionally impacted by watching news reports or witnessing violence?**

Brogan: In younger children, we may see some physical symptoms and signs of raised anxiety, such as stomach aches, changes in eating habits, nightmares. When children have trouble focusing, that could be a red flag that their thinking is going somewhere other than where it should be at the time. They may experience separation anxiety and want their parents not to leave them to go to work. Some become sad and withdrawn, some may refuse to attend school, and others worry

excessively about someone they love becoming a victim. While a certain level of fear or anxiety is normal, if reactions are particularly strong and interfering with their normal lives, you may want to explore seeking professional help.

## **If events occur while children are at school, who can they rely on to discuss what is occurring?**

Brogan: You should encourage children to develop a few "trusted adults," such as an extended family member, a coach, a maintenance worker, a teacher, a security guard – people whom they trust and who are responsible individuals. Many school systems have "trusted adults" programs so that children can talk to caring and trusted adults when troubling events occur. When [children](#) return home, it will be helpful to talk about what they discussed with their trusted adults. This creates a safety net to help in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

**More information:** For more information, see [ubhc.rutgers.edu/tlc/guideline ... ingMassViolence.html](http://ubhc.rutgers.edu/tlc/guideline...ingMassViolence.html)  
[www.nctsn.org/](http://www.nctsn.org/)

Provided by Rutgers University

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