

Talking to your kids about school shootings: Experts offer guidance

March 31 2023, by Cara Murez



Children should feel safe at school, but learning of a mass

shooting—like this week's tragedy at Covenant School in Nashville—can threaten their sense of security.

For parents, it can be challenging to know what to tell them.

Two [children's](#) mental health experts from UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas offer some advice.

Just as important as what's said is what not to say, according to [Dr. Beth \(Betsy\) Kennard](#), a professor of psychiatry and member of the Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute, and [Dr. James Norcross](#), chief of [child and adolescent psychiatry](#).

"The first thing to consider is the developmental level of the children so that you can provide answers and information at their level of understanding," Norcross said in a medical center news release. "All children, regardless of their age, should be encouraged to express their reactions to the event, and parents should feel free to talk about their emotions."

Kids are typically worried about their [personal safety](#) after experiencing a traumatic event, Norcross continued. "As parents, you should provide reassurance that they are safe and that you are there to protect them from harm," he said.

The Nashville shooting on Monday took the lives of three children and three adults. Police killed the shooter at the scene and are trying to piece together a motive for the attack.

Gun violence is now the leading cause of adolescent deaths in America, and it's possible your [kids](#) are hearing about Covenant or some other school shootings.

Kennard suggested starting the conversation by asking your children to tell you what they understand about what happened and what questions they have. Then you can adjust your responses.

More questions are likely after your child begins to process the event. Limit how much repeated exposure your child has to television coverage of the incident.

"Reassure your children that they have your support and that you are there to take care of them. As Fred Rogers of the long-running TV show 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood' would say, 'Look for the helpers; there are always helpers around.' Pointing out the positive responses in these events, such as communities uniting or people taking heroic actions, is also important," Kennard said.

Let your child know there are no wrong feelings and that people may react differently, Kennard said.

But pause the discussion if your child becomes very emotional, she advised.

You can ask your child, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most distress, where they are on the scale. Then ask how you can lower their distress.

Show your child you're listening by putting down distractions, like your phone, and maintaining eye contact while your child is talking.

Respond first by repeating what you heard the child say and maybe ask, "Did I get that right?" before responding.

"Let them know that it is normal to have [negative emotions](#), such as fear and anger. In addition, talk with them about ways that you manage these

emotions and identify positive ways to cope, such as getting exercise, doing something active and fun, or getting together with friends," Norcross suggested.

Avoid telling them how to feel or to dismiss their feelings, Kennard said. Use [active listening](#), repeating what you heard them say and allowing space for them to correct your understanding, she recommended.

If you think your child may be anxious or scared, watch for changes in behavior, such as regression to an earlier stage of development, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, stomachaches, headaches or disruptive behaviors, Norcross advised.

Some kids may not want to go to school or may lose interest in activities they once enjoyed.

Some general coping strategies for kids include engaging in relaxation and using problem-solving strategies, Kennard suggested.

Resist telling your children how to cope. Let them come up with their own strategies to reduce distress.

Try to maintain a normal routine and resist the temptation to allow your child to avoid fearful situations. That is likely to compound the problem.

"Persistent changes in mood or behavior may be a sign that additional help is needed," Norcross said.

Talk with your pediatrician to screen for depressive or [anxiety symptoms](#). If symptoms persist, your child may need to see a mental health professional.

More information: The Child Mind Institute has more on [talking](#) to

kids about school shootings.

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Citation: Talking to your kids about school shootings: Experts offer guidance (2023, March 31)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-03-kids-school-experts-guidance.html>

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