

How to talk with kids about scary events

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When scary or sad things happen in the world, whether thousands of miles away, in your state, your town, your backyard or your home, kids look to the adults that surround them to help them feel safe and understand what is happening. This can feel tricky and challenging, particularly when the adults themselves are also responding to and making sense of the same experience.

The Center for Resilience & Well-Being in Schools, at the Institute for Behavioral Science at CU Boulder, has resources to offer guidance for parents, guardians, teachers or anyone else who is regularly with children. The following is an adapted version of a resource on how to talk with children and [youth](#) when scary things happen. Full resources are available at this link.

Here are a handful of tips:

Check in with yourself first

Before talking with a youth, check in with yourself (How am I feeling? What do I need?) so that you are calm and grounded during the conversation. Just as youth have feelings about these experiences, so do adults. Checking in with yourself first will also help you to be ready to address any questions youth might have. It's OK not to have all the answers. Your warm, open presence is the most important thing.

Clarify your goal

As you approach the conversation, it can be helpful to start with a goal in mind. An overall goal is to create a safe space for youth to share their feelings, questions, reactions and experiences about the scary/sad thing and to feel your support. You might ask yourself, "How might I help my child feel safe?" "Is there some important [information](#) for them to know? Is there any misinformation to correct? What might my child already know or think about the situation?"

Keep coming back to messages of safety, support and willingness to keep talking.

Provide information

Share simple facts and information about what happened and balance it with information about how adults and/or community systems may have stepped forward to help and create safety. Match the type and amount of information to the developmental level of the youth. Ask open-ended questions about what they may have already heard and correct any misinformation. Keep this part of the discussion brief, simple and clear. Multiple short conversations can often be more powerful than a single long conversation.

Ask helpful questions

Ask helpful questions to learn more about the young person's thoughts, feelings, perspective and needs. The goal is to gain an understanding of the young person's experience and not one of "fact finding," or learning about specific details of a situation. The questions we ask should be open-ended and focused on their experience, emotion and perspective. ("What was that like for you?" "How are you feeling?" "What are you thinking/wondering about?" "Do you have any questions or worries?").

Validate feelings

Normalize and validate their [feelings](#). This doesn't mean that you're normalizing the bad thing that happened, but instead you're affirming that whatever they are feeling is normal and okay. You might say, "that makes sense," "I understand," "other people feel that way, too," and "you are not alone."

Reduce media exposure

Be aware of how much you are checking the media when you are with youth and be aware of how much they are tracking the event in the media to monitor and reduce negative impacts. While it is part of our

culture to be consistently connected to news and [social media](#), if youth see that you are checking your phone or the television constantly, they may be more likely to do the same.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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