

Talking to Students About a School Shooting

A school shooting is traumatic for parents, students and the community as a whole.

When a school shooting impacts a community, it is a harsh reminder that violent acts can strike in the most unexpected places. When children see such an event on television or the internet, it is natural for them to worry about their own school and their own safety, particularly if the violence occurred nearby or in a neighboring city or state.



Crisis and Disaster

Helping Those Affected

People are uncertain what to say or how to react to teens and young adults when faced with the tragedy of a school shooting. Some may have lost a close friend or someone they knew from class. Others may just be in shock that something like a shooting would happen on their campus. Still others who simply have heard about the shooting but live thousands of miles away wonder, “Could this happen at my school?” Below are a number of tips from leading experts on how to talk to others about a school shooting.

- 1. Listen to the student.** People need to vent and express their emotions. They’re not looking for answers or judgment, only for someone to listen to them. Be that person.
- 2. After the student has spent some time talking about his or her fears and concerns, reassure the student of his or her safety** — explain that the entire community is focused on keeping everyone safe and secure. Acknowledge that those in charge may not have all the answers, but they are making every effort to ensure the incident is never repeated. Provide the student with what efforts local officials and the police are making to keep the school safe and protected in the future.
- 3. When discussing the events with younger children, the amount of information shared should be limited to some basic facts.** Use words meaningful to them. Do not go into specific details with young children, because it will often be more scary and less understood than those who are older and understand the importance or meaning of such details.
- 4. Someone who has been involved in an incident like a shooting or has heard of a shooting will often ask, “Can this happen to me? Can this happen here?”** While a school shooting can happen anywhere, reiterate how the community is focused on working to keep everyone safe.
- 5. Parents, caregivers and teachers should be cautious of permitting young children to watch news or listen to a radio station that is discussing or showing the situation.** Personal discussions are the best way to share information with this group. Also, plan to discuss this many times over the coming weeks.
- 6. When discussing the events with preteens and teens, more detail is appropriate and many will already have seen news broadcasts.** Do not let them focus on graphic details. Rather, elicit their feelings and concerns and focus your discussions on what they share with you. Be careful of how much media they are exposed to. Talk directly with them about the tragedy and answer their questions truthfully. Remember to reassure them of their safety and your efforts to protect them.
- 7. Be on the lookout for physical symptoms of anxiety that children may demonstrate.** There may be signs that a child, although not directly discussing the situation, is very troubled by the recent events. Some signs include:
 - Headaches, stomachaches and backaches
 - Excessive worry, increased arguing and irritability
 - Nightmares, trouble sleeping, or eating and loss of concentration
 - Withdrawal, refusal to go to school and clinging behavior
- 8. Parents and caregivers should often reassure children that they will be protected and kept safe.** Express reassurance to provide the most comfort to children and teens.
- 9. If you are concerned about your children and their reaction to this or any tragedy, talk directly with their school counselor, family doctor or local mental health professional.** Suggest to older children and teens to visit a resource, such as the teen-help website, www.teencentral.com, which provides anonymous, clinically screened help and resources.

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