

HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT TRAUMATIC EVENTS

It seems that every day, something tragic happens somewhere in the world, such as school shootings, fatal car collisions, extreme weather conditions and terrorist attacks. Children's lives are touched by trauma on a regular basis, no matter how much parents or teachers try to keep the "bad things" away. Instead of shielding children from the dangers, violence or tragedies around us, adults should talk to kids about what is happening.

The conversation may not seem easy, but taking a proactive stance, discussing difficult events in age-appropriate language can help children feel safer and more secure.

As much as adults may try to avoid difficult topics, children often learn or know when something sad or scary happens, because of their exposure to media, such as TV, Facebook, or Twitter. If adults don't talk to them about it, a child may overestimate what is wrong or misunderstand adults' silence. Be aware because difficult news and tragedies are happening regularly. So, be the first to bring up a difficult topic. When parents tackle difficult conversations, they let their children know that they are available and supportive.



Guiding the Conversation

- **Find a quiet moment.** For parents, this could be after dinner or while making the next day's lunch. For teacher's, it could be after recess or lunch if a student seems troubled. This is time and place where your children can be the center of your attention.
- **Find out what they know.** For example, there was a shooting at a school or a bomb set off in another country. Ask them "What have you heard about this?" And then listen. Listen. Listen. And listen more.
- **Think about what you want to say or how you want to respond.** Some advanced planning may need to take place to make the discussion easier. If you do need to think about it, acknowledge the child's concerns and get back to them soon. You don't always have to respond off the top of your head.
- **Share your feelings with the child.** It is OK to acknowledge your feelings with children. They see you are human. They also get a chance to see that even though upset, you can pull yourself together and continue on. Parents and teachers hear it often: Be a role model. This applies to emotions, too.
- **Tell the truth.** Lay out the facts at a level they can understand. You do not need to give graphic details. For example, young children may not fully understand what death means and you may have to explain it in a way they can understand, such as no longer feeling anything, not hungry, thirsty, scared, or hurting; we will never see them again, but can hold their memories in our hearts and heads). Remember, it is OK to say, "I don't know." Sometimes the answer to the question is "I don't know." "Why did the bad people do this?" "I don't know" fits.
- **Above all, reassure.** At the end of the conversation, reassure the child that you will do everything you know how to do to keep them safe and to watch out for them. Reassure them that you will be available to answer any questions or talk about this topic again in the future. Reassure them that they are cared for.