



Responding to Tragedy: How to Talk With Children About Traumatic Events

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Here are some tips for talking with children about tragic events, such as natural disasters, a school shooting, mass shootings, systemic violence, and wars.

Choose a comfortable setting: You will want to pick a quiet time and place where the child will feel at ease to listen and share. The presence of sensitive and trusted adults is important in the first conversations after a tragedy. For caregivers, you may want to talk at the dinner table or on the sofa once everyone is home from school and work. Set a calm tone with soothing words. If your role allows, hold and comfort the child.



Start with questions: Ask the child what they know about the event and what questions or concerns they may have. “What have you heard about this?” Follow their lead as to what questions they need answered.

Provide age-appropriate details: Provide truthful information and clear up any misconceptions the child may have. Placing blame is not helpful. Avoid euphemisms like, ‘Passed away’, ‘lost’ or ‘She’s/they’re in a better place,’ because they can be confusing for young children. It’s also okay to say “I don’t know” if you don’t have the answer to one of their questions. Leave out graphic details and instead provide simple facts:

“There has been a tornado that hurt many homes and people. Some people are in the hospital getting help and others have died. You and I are safe and I’m calling our friends and family to check in.”

“There was a very sad event that happened at _____. A person used a gun to hurt and kill people. It is difficult to understand why someone would want to cause harm like this.”

“There is a horrible war in Ukraine that has caused many deaths and has forced people to leave their country. We feel really sad for the families and are thinking about ways that we can show our support. How are you feeling about what you have heard?”

Share your feelings: Sharing how you feel gives permission to your child to open up and express their feelings

about the event. Let the child know that you may also be sad or frustrated at times and talk about what you will do to take care of yourself when you are having big feelings.

Explore their feelings together: Invite children to express their feelings through [art](#), [journaling](#), [identifying the color or their emotions](#), or through play with stuffed animals. Support children in talking about how they feel, in their words. Listen openly and validate their feelings.

“This is a big and scary thing. I feel scared too. I wonder how you feel about it because I noticed that you have stayed in your room for a long time.”

“Feeling angry and sad is natural after hearing about or experiencing a scary event. What other words describe how you are feeling?”

Be prepared for possible reactions: Every child will respond differently based upon several factors, but here are some more common developmental reactions:

- **Preschool:** Young children may become clingy and regress to earlier behaviors (bed wetting, sucking their thumb). Avoid criticizing these behaviors.
- **Elementary:** Children may fear going to school, have trouble sleeping (nightmares), have trouble paying attention, and may replay the event over and over in their minds. They may complain of frequent headaches and stomachaches, which can be a sign that they are having trouble identifying what is bothering them. You may also notice a withdrawal from friends or favorite activities.
- **Middle School:** Children in this age range may have prolonged fear about their safety and have brief moments of grief (tears or aggressive outbursts). They may have challenges in school or want to avoid school altogether. There is also a risk for self-harm and suicidal thoughts – if suspected reach out promptly to a mental health professional or visit [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) or call 988
- **High School:** Older children may deny or hide that they are upset. Some teens may experience anger, depression, anxiety, fatigue, and sleeping problems. You may notice a change in appearance or social group. They may have difficulty with their academic performance and attendance. There is also a risk for self-harm and suicidal thoughts – if suspected reach out promptly to a mental health professional or the [National Suicide Prevention Hotline](#) 1 (800) 273-8255.

Help your child cope and process:

- **Stay calm and model self-care:** Tragedy affects all of us and it’s important to stay tuned to your own needs as you cope and process the tragic event.
- **Safety Reassurance:** Let the child know that you are together now and that you will do everything you can to keep them safe. Remind them that you will be there to help and answer any questions.
- **Limit media exposure and adult conversations:** Try to reduce exposure to graphic details as much as possible. Many children (and adults) will have a tough time getting these images out of their mind. However, kids will talk at school, you will not be able to shield them from everything. So, remember to check in regularly about what they see and hear. Children need to know that you are not hiding anything, and that you are open to talking about it.
- **Return to pre-disaster routines if possible:** Having a predictable sleeping and eating schedule helps children feel safe. Boredom can intensify negative thoughts, therefore try to schedule time to play, exercise, and have fun.
- **Encourage healthy expression of feelings:** Young children may act out when they are worried, scared, or asking for help. Help children name their feelings: “scared” “sad” “angry”, and try to expand their emotional vocabulary using books and videos, such as [Inside Out](#). Provide opportunities to express feelings in ways that won’t hurt - using words, journaling, art, or safe activities and movements. We

particularly recommend downloading the CDCs [Coping After Disaster](#) activity book for children.

- **Spend extra time together:** Connect by playing a game, walking, sports, singing, dancing, or reading together. This children's book, [A Terrible Thing Happened](#), is about a young raccoon who saw something awful happen. He tries to forget about it, but over time, it bothers him and makes his tummy feel sick. The story never goes into specifics about what "terrible thing", which makes it helpful for discussing any type of tragic event.
- **Commemorate and connect to community:** Attend memorial activities when feasible and stay connected to your support network. When possible, help others who are coping with a disaster by volunteering, providing food, or sending letters of encouragement. Seeing and hearing stories of people helping during tough times is healing and reassuring. In the words of Mr. Rogers:

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping. To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.”-?Fred Rogers

- **Create an emergency safety plan:** For younger children, share your preparation and plans for future emergencies. If your child is middle school or older, include them in the development of a safety plan. Having a plan will reduce anxiety or uncertainty about future disasters.
- **Seek help:** If you or your child feel stuck or overwhelmed, reach out to a licensed professional for support. [Click here to find local resources.](#)

For additional resources, visit our [Eluna Resource Center](#) or contact us directly for a [customized resource packet](#) specific to your area and needs.

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