

## How to Talk to Your Children About Violence

Tragic events such as school shootings serve as a shocking reminder that violence can happen anywhere, even in good schools in affluent communities. Parents who wonder whether a violent event has troubled their children should face the issue head on by inviting their kids to talk.

Child care experts recommend *listening* first. Find out how your children feel, and then ask open-ended questions. See what their reactions are and how they're responding.

You know your children best. Tailor the type and amount of information you share based on their age and maturity. For teenagers, knowledge is power. They may want specific details so they can feel more in control. Watching the news together can provide an opportunity to talk about what issues come up—emotionally and intellectually—as stories analyzing the tragedy unfold.

### Don't bombard younger children with too much information

Parents shouldn't let younger children watch TV accounts of the violent events or be overexposed to graphic photographs in newspapers and magazines. Don't give pre-school and grade-school-age children a lot of details, but if they have questions, answer them briefly. If they're worried, be sure to ask them what they're worried about. Let them tell you their fears.

While acknowledging how scary and heartbreaking such incidents are, parents should also emphasize that it is extremely rare for children to be hurt by this kind of violence. Remind children that there are many adults who look out for their safety: teachers, neighbors, police.

Don't pretend to have all the answers. It's OK to say, "We may never know why it happened. Maybe something was lacking in their lives." Discuss what might have been missing. Children are very perceptive about these things.

### Watch for signs of stress

Children react to fear, stress or trauma in different ways. Over the next few weeks after a violent incident, you may notice disrupted sleep patterns, frequent nightmares and/or insomnia; changes in eating habits, loss of appetite or overeating; decline in school performance; lack of concentration; irritability or prolonged depression. Younger children may display separation anxiety, not wanting to be left alone in a room, or getting upset when parents leave the house. They may cling to parents more than usual.

If you want to seek professional counseling for your child, the toll-free phone number on this site is a good place to start.

Remember, these symptoms are common reactions to anxiety. However, if symptoms persist for longer than six weeks and disrupt your child's daily routine, seek help from a social worker, pediatrician or psychologist. A professional cannot only help your child deal with his emotions, but can provide valuable tips and guidance to parents.

How you react to a traumatic event gives your children clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may be more scared. The following tips may make it easier for you to talk to your children and alert you to early warning signs of a child at risk:

### How to talk to teenagers

1. Don't force the issue. Let them know that you're willing to listen when they're ready to talk.
2. Ask open-ended questions about what they think or feel.
3. Don't lecture, preach or interrupt.
4. Watch the news together and discuss the information in the broadcast.

5. Reassure them that it's normal to feel anxious after such an incident.
6. Emphasize that such violence is rare.
7. Discuss their school's safety program.

### **How to talk to younger children**

1. Don't let young children be bombarded by graphic images on TV or in newspapers and magazines.
2. Don't bring up the subject of the violent event, but if children ask questions, answer them briefly and honestly.
3. Reassure children that their school is safe.
4. Remind children that there are many adults watching out for their safety.
5. Don't pretend to have all the answers.

### **Warning signs that your child may become violent**

1. Withdrawal from family, friends and school activities.
2. Excessive feelings of rejection and isolation.
3. Feelings of being persecuted and picked on.
4. Low school interest and academic performance.
5. Expressions of violence in writing and drawings.
6. Uncontrolled anger.
7. Patterns of impulsive hitting, intimidating and bullying behavior.
8. Drug use and alcohol use.
9. Affiliation with gangs.
10. Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.

### **Helpful resources**

The following resources and books may provide additional information and support:

#### **Web sites**

##### **Safe and Drug Free Schools Program**

[www.ed.gov/offices/oese/sdfs/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/oese/sdfs/)

The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program is the federal government's primary vehicle for reducing drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and violence, through education and prevention activities in our nation's schools.

##### **National School Safety Center**

[www.nssc1.org](http://www.nssc1.org)

The National School Safety Center was created by presidential directive in 1984 to meet the growing need for additional training and preparation in the area of school crime and violence prevention.

##### **Center For The Prevention Of School Violence**

[www.cpsv.org](http://www.cpsv.org)

The Center's public awareness campaign keeps the public informed about all aspects of the problem of school violence as well as what can be done to solve it.

##### **National Alliance For Safe Schools**

[www.safeschool.org/](http://www.safeschool.org/)

This not-for-profit, training and technical assistance organization is dedicated to the promotion of an orderly educational environment.

## **National School Safety And Security Services**

[www.schoolsecurity.org/](http://www.schoolsecurity.org/)

This site provides proactive, cost-effective recommendations for preventing and managing violence, reducing risks and liability, and improving public relations.

### **Suggested reading**

*Everything You Need to Know About School Violence* by Anna Kreiner. Rosen Publishing Group, 1995. A thoughtful discussion of violence in schools, complete with examples of incidents and suggestions for coping.

*Practical School Security: Basic Guidelines for Safe and Secure Schools* by Kenneth S. Trump. Corwin Press, 1997.

A thorough guide to creating and implementing a workable safety and security plan in schools.

*Safe Schools: A Handbook for Violence Prevention* by Ronald D. Stephens. National Educational Service, 1995.

This book includes school safety plans to show readers how to assess school safety and develop, implement and evaluate a comprehensive safe school plan.

*Safe Schools: A Security and Loss Prevention Plan* by James Barry Hylton. Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996.

Drawing from his career in law enforcement and security, Hylton discusses a wide range of security programs and measures for schools.

*Violence in Schools: Learning in Fear* by Nancy Day. Enslow Publishers, 1996.

This book examines the increasing acts of violence committed in schools and provides a thorough background on the causes and effects of school violence and some possible solutions, including steps students can take to protect themselves.

*Waging Peace in Our Schools* by Linda Lantieri, Janet Patti, Marian Wright Edelman. Ballantine Books, 1998.

These three prominent conflict-resolution activists argue that schools must educate the heart as well as the mind. This book is a practical guide, filled with stories, ideas and advice for using innovative techniques to create "peaceable classrooms."

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