

Talking to Children about a School Shooting

General Guidelines

Don't assume your child knows about the school shooting. If they do know, find out what they have heard and what they know. For younger children, do not watch the news or read about the incident on the internet when they are nearby. Monitor/limit children's television and internet usage. The frightening images and repetition can be disturbing to children as well as adolescents.

If your child hears about the shootings and asks you about it, take your time and think about how you want to respond. Take your lead from them. Consider your child's age and level of maturity. A general guideline is "less is more". Often a simple statement is all children need to reassure them. Older children and adolescents may need more information. Acknowledge that something did happen at a school and it was a tragic event. For those children who need more information, answer their questions and wait to see if they need more.

Most importantly, reassure your child. Many children-and adults-will feel frightened. This has shattered our sense of safety. Remind them that is a rare and unusual event and schools are a safe place.

Don't forget to take care of yourself so you can take care of your children. Be a model for your children on how to manage traumatic events.

Other helpful information from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) <http://www.nasponline.org/>

Tell children the truth. Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

Stick to the facts. Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

Reassure children that they are safe and so are the other important adults in their lives.

Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate. Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Upper middle school and high school students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!

Focus on your children over the week following the tragedy. Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.

Stay close to your children. Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.

Maintain a “normal” routine. To the extent possible stick to your family’s normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., but don’t be inflexible. Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.

Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed. These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.

Safeguard your children’s physical health. Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise, and nutrition.

Consider praying or thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families. It may be a good time to take your children to your place of worship, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.

If you have concerns about your child’s reaction, please contact your building school psychologist/counselor/social worker.

Source: Westport Public Schools