



Talking to Children About Tragic Events in the News

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Tragic events presented on TV, radio, or the internet can be particularly disturbing for children especially when the images are violent or the stories concern disturbing topics. Children can internalize and personalize such stories creating worries that undermine their sense of safety and security.

Tips for Parents

- Consider the child's age before discussing the situation. Younger children may be less aware and may need to know only limited details. The very young lack the maturity and cognitive ability to process such information and put it in perspective. Use active listening to out what your children know before offering information about the event. Avoid over-explaining and use your child's words and level of understanding to communicate.
- Remain calm when talking with your children. Reassure them that you and the other grown-ups are doing everything possible to ensure their safety. Help your children put the event in perspective by letting them know that such tragic events are rare. Review with them the security measures in place at home and school.
- Avoid exposing younger children to TV and media coverage of the event. Such images are very disturbing and upsetting to children. Typically video and media coverage is repeated and younger children may believe the event is still happening again and again. Children of any age may internalize the event and fear that it might happen to them, creating worries and concerns that can generalize to other situations. Listen to their feelings and fears and respond with a caring tone of voice and a reassuring demeanor.
- Older children may be more aware of these events from other sources such as discussion with other children, overhearing adult conversation and other incidental information. Parents should be prepared to deliver and help the child process only as much information as the child needs to know. It is best to provide only as much detail as the child is interested in.
- Teens will be more likely to be exposed to information concerning a tragic event. Encourage them to discuss and process their reactions, thoughts and feelings about what they have seen. Discuss with them the manner in which the situation was presented in the media and use it as an opportunity to consider the possible agenda of some news sources to increase ratings with sensational coverage.
- Watch the news or related programs with your children to filter inappropriate or frightening stories. When viewing any program with violent or disturbing content, children may not yet understand the distinctions between fact and fantasy. Avoid allowing children to view any shows or video games that are too graphic and inappropriate for your child's age or developmental level.

- Help your child put news stories in proper context. Discuss with them how certain events are isolated and use disturbing events as an opportunity to talk about the heroes, first responders, cooperation of a community and the ability of people to cope with overwhelming circumstances.
- Talk about what you and your child can do to help. Children may gain a sense of control and feel more secure if they can find ways to help those impacted by tragedy or honor those who died.