Talking with students about violent tragedies: practical advice for educators

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SchoolCrisisCenter.org | GrievingStudents.org
1-877-536-NCSCB (1-877-536-2722)
Agenda

1. How to Support Children After a Crisis
2. Events in the Media
3. Symptoms of Adjustment Reactions
4. Timeline for Adjustment
5. Importance of Professional Self-care
6. Resources
Starting the Conversation

• Begin by asking what they already understand about what happened

• Look for misunderstandings or frightening misinformation

• We cannot assume that children's worries are the same as our own

• Provide basic information in simple and direct terms and ask for questions

• Reassure children that they can and should feel safe

• Limit the amount of exposure to media coverage
Children May Ask About Whose Fault it is

• Blaming is a way to feel as if you can regain control of uncomfortable feels and a sense of personal risk
• This doesn’t ease the immediate feelings of grief and fear nor does it provide solutions for the future
• Terrorists and others that commit violent acts do not represent a particular race, ethnic, religious or other group
Children May Wonder How this Tragedy Affects Them Personally

- Especially in difficult times, children may act immaturity.
- They may become even more concerned about what affects them personally.
- Once they feel reassured, they are more likely to be able to think about the needs of others.
- Children who were not directly impacted may also not be concerned or interested.
- Once children start to feel safe and understand what is going on, many will want to help.
Talking to children about terrorist attacks and school and community shootings in the news

This guide offers advice on how to talk to children about tragic events, such as shootings and terrorist attacks, that they are likely to hear about at school and/or on the news.
Psychological First Aid

• Provide broadly to those impacted

• Supportive services to foster normative coping and accelerate natural healing process

• All staff should understand likely reactions and how to help children cope
Anyone that interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support – if unprepared, they can be a source of further distress.
# PFA Actions

*source: American Red Cross*

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<th>Help People Feel Comfortable and at Ease</th>
<th>Be Kind, Calm, &amp; Compassionate</th>
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<td>Listen</td>
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Potential Symptoms of Adjustment Reactions

- Sleep Problems
- Separation Anxiety and School Avoidance
- Anxiety and Trauma-related Fears
- Difficulties with Concentration
- Deterioration in Academic Performance
- Regression
- Depression
- Substance Abuse
- Somatization
- Post-traumatic Reactions and Disorders
- Guilt
Range of Reactions to Crisis

- Wide range of reactions and concerns
  - NOT JUST PTSD

- Bereavement

- Secondary losses and stressors
  - Relocation
  - Loss of peer network
  - Academic failure
  - New social network
  - Financial stresses
  - Parental stress, mental health problems
  - Marital conflict or domestic violence

- One crisis often awakens feelings related to pre-existing or past crisis

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Parents Often Underestimate Symptoms

- Children may withhold complaints because of concerns they are abnormal, or to protect parents who are upset
- Parents may not think professionals are interested or assume “normal reactions to abnormal event”
- Stigma related to mental illness
Adjustment Over Time in Crisis

A = baseline functioning
B = event
C = vulnerable state
D = usual coping mechanisms fail
E = helplessness, hopelessness
F = improved functioning

G = continued impairment
H = return to baseline
I = post-traumatic growth
Importance of Professional Self-care

• Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress

• It’s critical adults find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized

• Create a culture where:
  – it is ok to be upset
  – members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
Resources
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

Initial Funding: September 11th Children’s Fund & National Philanthropic Trust
Current Support: New York Life Foundation

- Promote appreciation of role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss
- Enhance training in professional education programs
- Serve as resource for information, training materials, consultation and technical assistance – provided at no charge to schools
Through an interdisciplinary team of medical, mental health, and school professionals, the NCSCB provides:

- Confidential on-site/remote technical assistance and consultation for school leadership and professionals
- Practical and timely advice via a 24/7 toll-free number and email
- Ongoing support in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and throughout the long-term recovery period
- Educational resources and crisis management tools
- School staff training and community presentations; professional development for range of professional audiences
See our guide for talking to children about terror attacks and tragedies

THE NCSCB
Dedicated to helping schools support their students through crisis and loss

I Need Help Now
Materials and guidance for schools experiencing crises or helping grieving students

Help Me Prepare
Resources and guidelines to prepare to support children in times of crisis and loss
www.grievingstudents.org

Order Free Materials

After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

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