Talking to Children About Violence

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has reissued information for parents and teachers about how to talk to young children about high profile acts of violence. According to NASP, adults can help children feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security and talking with children about their fears. The tips outlined by NASP include the following:

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that their schools and homes are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

2. **Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.

3. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
   a. **Early elementary school children** need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school and home safety, such as how exterior doors are locked.
b. **Upper elementary and early middle school children** will be more vocal in asking about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school and home. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy.

c. **Upper middle school and high school children** will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in school and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school and home safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that children of this age have in maintaining safe schools and homes by following school and home safety guidelines (e.g., not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to adults at school and home, and accessing support for emotional needs.

4. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the home to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.

5. **Observe children’s emotional state.** Some children do not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can indicate a child’s level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be
at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of mental health professionals if you are at all concerned.

6. **Limit television viewing of these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers.

7. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don’t push them if they seem overwhelmed.

NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children’s trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org

For further information regarding this or other articles, please contact Dr. Karen Kuehn Howell at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Rd. NE, Suite 309W Atlanta, GA 30306. You can also phone us at 404 712-9829 or visit our website at www.emory.edu/MSACD

Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD).