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Coping with Community Crisis

Resources for parents and educators on talking to kids about trauma and loss

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How do you talk to your child — in a way that both reassures and acknowledges fears — in the wake of trauma and community violence?

Today's 24/7 news culture — now fed by livestreamed video chronicling trauma as it happens — provides an ever-open window to events that both children and adults grapple to understand. When bad things happen on the world's stage, it is very natural and healthy for children to bring up questions at home or in the classroom, says psychologist Richard Weissbourd (http://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty/richard-weissbourd), co-director of the Making Caring Common (https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/home) project.

"When these events happen, children, like the rest of us, need to wrap their minds around it," says Weissbourd. "They're seeing images and hearing stories that are hard to absorb."

Decisions about what to say to children, and what not to say, should be guided by a child's developmental age, says Weissbourd. Among the general strategies he offers to parents and educators about how to talk to children about difficult events:

1. The most important thing is to **listen** to children to understand how *they* perceive the trauma. "What you're scared about, as an adult, may not be what they're scared about … and this is likely to be different for children at different developmental ages." In a classroom setting, Weissbourd says having a school therapist present can also prove helpful.
2. **Prepare** to answer the "why" questions that will inevitably come. Weissbourd says children are inclined to ask, for example, why the perpetrators of a crime or a terrorist event did what they did. They're owed an explanation, he says, but the answer should be tailored to a child's age. In the case of terrorism, for example, "It's hard for a 4- or 7-year-old to understand that, but an adolescent can have that conversation." According to resources offered by the American Psychological Association (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/terror-exposure.aspx), parents can tell a child that there are some bad people in the world and that some bad things happen, but that there are many other good people and good things that can protect us and give us strength and support.
3. **Protect** your child (and yourself) from seeing traumatic visual images over and over again. Turn off the television, take a break from social media streams. Be aware of the prevalence of viral videos on social media, and the fact that your children might see videos without you knowing.
4. **Modeling** how you manage through tough times also helps to build resilience in children. "Your kids or your students will watch how you respond to scary events, and they take cues from you," says Weissbourd, "So often events that are scary for kids are scary for adults, too. As parents and educators, we also have to take care of ourselves."
5. Develop a **safety plan** with your child, or for your classroom. In the aftermath of a violent event, if a child is scared about doing something he or she normally does, "try to think about how a child might do these things and still be safe." Among his suggestions: talk about safety in groups, or provide a phone number to call should they need encouragement when facing a situation that may trigger fears.
6. **Help children use self-soothing techniques**. "If kids are feeling really stressed and worked up, deep breathing, getting exercise, listening to music and other strategies for calming down and managing anxiety can really help," says Weissbourd.

What should you *not* say? Weissbourd says the guiding principle is to talk to kids in ways they understand, while being careful to not provide too much detail to a younger child.

“When children can understand why, when they can make a scary event coherent, they are better able to trust again,” says Weissbourd. “Spend some time thinking — and talk to other adults you trust — about how to talk to your child in a way that will help them understand and make sense of events that may otherwise feel unpredictable and overwhelming.”

How to Help Children Cope with Trauma

- Listen to how they're processing the event.
- Prepare to answer the "why" questions — simply, and tailored to a child's age.
- Protect them from traumatic media coverage.
- Model the response you want to encourage.

Additional Resources

- A conversation between Richard Weissbourd and Eve Ewing, Ed.D.'16, about how teens grapple with community violence (http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/15/05/power-listening)
- NASP trauma resources (http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/trauma)
- Helping children cope with secondary traumatic stress (http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/secondary_traumatic_tress.pdf) [PDF]
- The American Academy of Pediatrics on talking to children about disaster and crisis (http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx)
- Simple advice from Mr. Rogers on helping young children cope with tragic events (http://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/tragic-events.php)
- American Psychological Association (http://www.apa.org/): How to talk to children about difficult news and tragedies (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children.aspx); building resilience to manage indirect exposure to terror and crisis (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/terror-exposure.aspx); recovering emotionally (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx) from traumatic events; helping children manage distress in the aftermath of a shooting (http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/aftermath.aspx)