

## Helping Children Cope With Violence and Terror Tips for Parents and Teachers

The recent sniper shootings in the Washington, DC area are yet another unfortunate incident of violence and terror hitting too close to home. Children are likely to become increasingly frightened or anxious as long as the shootings and school lockdowns continue. Parents and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of personal safety and security. This may seem more difficult given the seemingly random nature of these attacks, but in fact **most children are safe**. They will look to adults for reassurance and guidance on how to react. What adults say and do can help distance children from the sense of threat, help them work through their emotions, and maintain or regain a sense of normalcy.

### All Adults Should:

1. **Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.
2. **Reassure children that they are safe** and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives. Point out factors that help insure their immediate safety and that of their community, such as staying indoors for recess and lunch and the presence of police and security officers.
3. **Remind them the trustworthy people are in charge.** Explaining that the police, emergency workers, federal law enforcement, and school officials are working to keep people safe and find the perpetrator.
4. **Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
5. **Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief or fear. **Signs of heightened anxiety include:**
  - Refusing to go to school and excessive "clinging"
  - Persistent fears related to the shootings
  - Worry that loved ones might get hurt
  - Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep, or bedwetting
  - Irritability and loss of concentration

- Increase agitation
  - Being easily startled and jumpy
  - New or unusual behavior problems
  - Physical complaints for which a physical cause cannot be found
  - Withdrawal from family and friends
  - Sadness, listlessness, or decreased activity
  - Preoccupation with the death or violence
6. **Look for children at greater risk.** 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. Be particularly observant for those who may be at risk of suicide. Seek the help of mental health professional if you are at all concerned.
  7. **Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event or events have 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.
  8. **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.
  9. **Keep your explanation 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 victims and affected community. ***For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!***
  10. **Monitor your own stress level.** Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is okay to let your children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

## What Parents Can Do

1. **Focus on your children during this time.** Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.
2. **Make time to talk with your children.** Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.
3. **Stay close to you 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.
4. **Limit your child's television viewing of these events.** If they must watch, watch with them for a brief time; then turn the set off. Don't sit mesmerized re-watching the same events over and over again.
5. **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 hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.
6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope.** Most schools will stay open and are in fact a good place for children to maintain a sense of connectedness to people they know and trust. Some children will find being in lockdown mode frightening or unsettling. Reassure them that it is very unlikely that something bad will happen at their school but that adults are being extra cautious and that the emergency procedures help keep everyone safe. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children and adults who need it. Don't force your child to go to school if they are frightened.

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