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Talking to your children about the recent spate of school shootings

Few events hit home for children and families like a school shooting. When children see such an event on television or on Web-based news flashes, it is natural for them to worry about their own school and their own safety, particularly if the violence occurred nearby or in a neighboring city or state.

Talk to your children

Psychologists who work in the area of trauma and recovery advise parents to use the troubling news of school shootings as an opportunity to talk and listen to their children. It is important, say these psychologists, to be honest. Parents should acknowledge to children that bad things do happen, but also reassure them with the information that many people are working to keep them safe, including their parents, teachers, and local police.

Young children may communicate their fears through play or drawings. Elementary school children will use a combination of play and talking to express themselves. Adolescents are more likely to have the skills to communicate their feelings and fears verbally. Adults should be attentive to a child's concerns, but also try to help the children put their fears into proportion to the real risk. Again, it is important to reassure children that the adults in their lives are doing everything they can to make their environment—school, home, and neighborhood—safe for them.

Parents, teachers, and school administrators also need to communicate with one another not only about how to keep kids safe, but about which children might need more reassurance and the best way to give it to them.

Limit exposure to news coverage

Parents should also monitor how much exposure a child has to news reports of traumatic events, including these recent school shootings. Research has shown that some young children believe that the events are reoccurring each time they see a television replay of the news footage.

Know the warning signs

Most children are quite resilient and will return to their normal activities and personality relatively quickly, but parents should be alert to any signs of anxiety that might suggest that a child or teenager might need more assistance. Such indicators could be a change in the child's school performance, changes in relationships with peers and teachers, excessive worry, school refusal, sleeplessness, nightmares, headaches or stomachaches, or loss of interest in activities that the child used to enjoy. Also remember that every child will respond to trauma differently. Some will have no ill effects; others may suffer an immediate and acute effect. Still others may not show signs of stress until sometime after the event.

For more information, go to www.apahelpcenter.org.

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