

Supporting Children in a Time of Tragedy: 10 Simple Steps for Parents and Educators



While we know that there are not simple and easy answers to explain violence to children, we do know that the best antidote to fear is helping young people to be powerful. In that spirit, we offer 10 simple responses that adults can make to children's questions about the tragedy.

In these times it is critical that we create safe spaces for our young people to ask these questions. And it is even more important that we provide comfort, reassurance, and a sense of safety. Adults as well as children feel confused and frightened, sometimes angry and even guilty when people die for no apparent reason. At the same time, adults need to step up, be present for children and young people, listen and speak carefully, and avoid our own impulse to deny the pain and fear that large-scale violence generates.

While we know that there are not simple and easy answers to explain violence, we do know that the best antidote to fear is helping young people to be powerful. In that spirit, we offer 10 simple responses that adults can make to children's questions, in order to support them over the next days and weeks.

1. What happened? Listen for children's questions. Don't force answers, but be prepared with clear, concrete explanations. We each need to decide what level of detail is appropriate for our explanations, but children deserve an explanation of difficult, frightening events.

2. Why did this happen? Again, it is important to listen carefully for the feeling and meaning behind children's questions. Answers to the "why" questions are especially hard to formulate. Here are some possibilities:

- For all children: We don't know exactly why this happens, but we know that sometimes people hurt each other because they are angry and have no way to say it. Then innocent people can get hurt.
- For elementary school children: After the response above, you might follow up with some questions. Do you know of other places where innocent people have been hurt by violence? Do you have ideas about why this happens? Do you have ideas about how adults could make it less likely for this kind of violence to happen?
- For middle school children: After the response above, you might follow up with the same questions as for elementary students. You might go a step farther with teens to ask: Why do you think cycles of violence continue? How can we work together to make this less likely? Teens may be feeling powerless and may be looking for constructive things to do with their feelings, asking, "What can I do to help?" Support them in finding their own power to act and help them to find ways to get involved.

3. Is it okay to feel this way? Feelings of fear, anger, and sadness are predictable. It's important to be sure that we don't shut these feelings down.

4. How can I talk about this? Some children may need help finding words to even talk about their feelings or concerns.

5. Will you listen to me without judging? It is important to listen right now, and over time. It is important to avoid judging children's feelings. Try to avoid statements like, "You shouldn't worry," or "You just need to be brave."

6. Is it my fault? Young children especially sometimes feel that any bad event must be "my fault." Although obvious to us as adults, it is important to remind young children that bad things happen for no reason; this is not their fault.

7. Will I be safe? It is impossible to fully re-assure children about their safety. However, adults can remind children that we will do everything we can to make sure they are safe in school, at home, and in their neighborhood. We can also let children know that this kind of violence is rare.

8. Who are the bad guys? Who are the good guys? It's important to reassure children that they are safe and that they are surrounded by good, caring and kind people. Remind them about the many helpers, the peacemakers, who make the world a better and safer place every day.

9. Can I talk with you later? Questions may go underground for a while and re-appear later. Stay open to questions, and be aware of the ways in which children's concerns may come back when they – and we – least expect it.

10. Are you okay? Sometimes children worry about us as adults, but they won't talk to us about those fears. It is important to let children know that we also feel worried, sad or even angry when this kind of violence happens. We use our friends and families to help support us. Adults need support too.

For more information and resources around this topic, here are a few places we suggest you visit:

[Soothing Strategies: Talking with Kids About News \(PBS\)](#) - Offers suggestions for answering kids' questions about the news and practical de-stressing and communication strategies.

[Fred Rogers talks about Tragic Events in the News](#) - Mr. Rogers offers a reassuring message for families of young children on how to deal with difficult times.

[When the World Is a Dangerous Place](#) - Teachers can play an important role in helping young children deal with violence in the news. Diane Levin offers practical strategies for helping students process violent news through play and conversation.

[Talking to Children About Violence](#) - The National Association of School Psychologists offer a tip sheet for parents and teachers about talking to children about violence.