

Talking With Children/Students About the Sandy Hook Elementary Shooting

Turn off television coverage. Children can't psychologically screen what they see and put it into the same kind of history and context that we have as adults. Their mis-perceptions are great. After 9/11, many younger children in the US thought that there were planes continuing to hit more and more buildings. Talking about events allows children to wonder and ask more questions. Seeing graphic coverage gives children visuals that come back to them as dreams and, for some, flashbacks or a sense of hyper-arousal or a sense of hyper-vigilance. Television coverage is both too graphic and overly dramatic. Turn it off.

Do take time to talk with children/students about what happened. Often we think that, if they're not asking about it, they don't know about it or aren't worried. Often, though, they are just being "loyal" to our non-verbal messages. Ask them what they already know and go from there.

Let them tell you their concerns, and rather than giving advice or saying, "Don't worry," first validate their feelings. "I can imagine that is exactly how this feels for you." And then, instead of giving your own advice ("Don't worry ... the man who did this has also died...") ask the youth what would help them feel safe. "What can I/we do that would make you feel safer right now?" "What should we think about in the future?"

We really have to ask students what will help them feel safe, and then we need to listen. Often we think we know what will help them feel safe, and we can't really know unless we ask the youth. In one incident where a high school student killed a girl classmate, the principal thought that having metal detectors at the entrances and visual security would help them feel safer, but when students were asked, their reply was that they wanted self-defense taught for girls' PE. OUR solutions may not make THEM feel safe!

Children sometimes have night-time fears. If your child is afraid to sleep alone in their room, let them bring a sleeping bag in to your room for a few nights, or stay with them while they fall asleep. If you do that, let them know where you'll be sleeping, though, so they don't wake up upset that you're not still in the room.

Youth will do as well as the adults around them, so dealing with our insecurities and fears away from our children is helpful. It is helpful to use a calm demeanor when we're speaking with our children. That also means that giving parents and teachers support is critical, as the recovery of the youth is so tied to their stability. That isn't to say that we aren't honest. It is fine to admit that you have concerns and fears, but do so from a place of emotional control. "I am worried about some of those things as well, but I also know that many very bright people are working on issues like this, so I know that we'll continue to work on how to keep kids safe."

Keeping routine is helpful. Give children/students more warning and extra support for changes in their usual day.



Some children may be more “clingy” or needing to be close to family or known adults. It is OK to indulge in special requests and needs, but also provide a balance by pointing out the things that are still OK, the things that people are doing to keep your child safe, and so on. Give these youth extra support, but continue to work with them in ways that they can have a sense of self-control. Ask them to identify steps they can take that will help them feel safe as well. Being able to come up with answers themselves provides a sense of mastery. It may take many small steps for your child to move back toward his/her usual demeanor.

This is a general **framework for speaking to youth**, or for when we answer their questions about these terrible events: We need to be honest, the answer needs to respect the integrity of the child and the integrity of the question, we need to give details that do not add any gore or trauma to what they already know or perceive, and it is often best to only give a brief answer that is just what they’ve asked, and then ask what else they want to know. Often when a child asks a question, we give way too many details and may go off in a direction that we think is of their interest. It is much more helpful for us to give less information and wait for the next question.

Recognize that, even if we don’t talk with our children about these events, **they will often hear about it from other students/kids in the neighborhood**. It always feels like a more stable world to youth when they hear about these things from us rather than from other youth. Often, if they hear about it from peers, they don’t let us know they’re worried, assuming that we are expecting them to manage this world on their own. So at that point, the only wisdom they have for dealing with that is the wisdom of others their own age. Never miss a chance to be a part of these conversations in your child’s life!

These events are still very, very rare. As indefinably horrible as this is, we are much more apt to lose our children in car wrecks, by suicide, in accidents or terminal illness. This is so very heart-breaking for so many reasons, and this is not in any way meant to minimize the impact of this event for those who are in the inner circle of impact, but for those from communities outside of the Sandy Hook Elementary area, we need to continue to recognize that our kids are generally as safe as they were last week. In fact, no doubt, most schools are paying greater attention to school security than usual.

It is sometimes helpful to talk about the fact that lots and lots of people can be very, very angry, but very few take steps that put other’s lives at risk. It is important not to equate ordinary anger with this gunman’s actions at the school. For younger children you might compare it to a problem or illness in his mind that is rare, but be sure that children understand that **anger is a part of the normal range of emotions**. The salient issue is how people manage their emotions and behaviors. Youth need to be able to see that parents and others can be very upset or angry, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anyone’s life is at risk.

Please let us know what else would be helpful!

