

School Shootings: How to Comfort Your Child



Few events are as devastating as a school shooting. Maybe discussing mass violence with your kids wasn't on your parenting radar before. But it is now.

Hiding these terrible events from children isn't an option: Kids see news coverage on TV or social media, overhear people talking about it and practice active shooter drills at school.

You may be wondering what you can do to help your child cope. Here are some tips to guide conversations with your child and help reassure them during troubling times:

Limit News Exposure

You might find it helpful to filter TV news shows. Research indicates that young children don't understand that video replays are the same event – they think it's a separate occurrence each time. And for older kids, continuing to see disturbing images keeps negative thoughts at the forefront of their minds. So limiting your child's exposure to news coverage of distressing events can help lessen the trauma for them.

Consider switching channels or turning off the TV when the school shooting story airs. Try reading the news online instead, or record a TV news program to watch after your child goes to bed.

And be careful what you talk about in front of your children. Even if you think they aren't paying attention to a grown-up conversation, they're likely listening.

Start A Conversation

How can you explain senseless violence to your child? The answer: You don't have to. What's most important is to let your child talk about thoughts, feelings and concerns and to offer reassurances.

Start a dialogue by asking what your child has heard. This is a good chance to correct any misinformation. Then ask if your child has any questions. Your child's concerns and knowledge about the event can guide the conversation. Be honest but keep your answers appropriate for your child's age and understanding.

Sometimes children need more than one conversation to process what happened, especially if they have additional questions or kids are talking about the shooting at school. If your child seems to be lingering around you more than usual, it may be a clue that they want to talk. Younger kids may also express their fears or concerns through drawings or imaginary play.

Provide Reassurances

Many kids fear that a shooting will occur at their school, too. How can you address those concerns?

- Acknowledge that bad things do happen occasionally.
- Explain that the likelihood of such an event happening to your child is very small.
- Describe actions that parents, teachers and police are taking to keep kids safe.

- Explain that all the kids in school can be a part of school safety. Encourage your child to tell a teacher or trusted adult if they hear someone making threats or acting in a way that makes them uncomfortable.

Find Ways to Help

Turning concern into action can be a healthy way for you and your child to channel any worries you may have. It gives you a sense of control and something positive to focus on. Get involved with an organization that is helping the affected families. You can send supportive cards, attend a rally or talk to your local government representative or school board about ways to make schools safer.

Notice Behavior Changes in Your Child

It's normal for your child to have some [anxiety](#) after learning about a school shooting. Talking about it with your child and providing reassurances often helps the anxiety ease over time. However, if you notice signs of continuing anxiety or depression, seek the help of a [behavioral health](#) professional or see a pediatrician.

Signs of anxiety and depression in children include:

- Refusing to go to school
- Clinging to parents or other caregivers
- Irritable, defiant or more demanding behavior
- Decline in school performance
- No longer interested in fun activities
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns (either more or less)
- Headaches and stomachaches

(Have a teen? Find out [how to recognize the signs of depression in teens](#).)

Although school shootings are rare, they have a profound effect on us. Talking with your children about these tragedies and providing reassurances is key to

helping them cope with what's happened. If you're concerned about your child's physical or mental health, your [pediatrician](#) can guide you to the next step for care.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [National Association of School Psychologists - Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers](#)
- [American Psychological Association – Talking to Your Children About the Recent Spate of School Shootings](#)
- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network - Talking to Children About the Shooting](#)
- [American Academy of Pediatrics - Talking to Children About Tragedies & Other News Events](#)