

10 Tips for Talking to Kids About Tragic Events

Source: NewportAcademy.com

Talking about what's happening is the best approach for how to help a child after a traumatic event. Discussing the event with a trusted adult—a parent, grandparent, therapist, or guidance counselor—can help children and teenagers process their feelings.

Even if a child or teen appears indifferent to the event, it's important to talk about it. They may be feeling strong emotions under the stoic front. The first step is opening a safe space for communication.

How to Start the Conversation

(1) Begin by finding out what they already know.

Ask them what they have heard about the event. Make sure you're informed beforehand so you can fill in missing facts about the event that they might not be aware of.



(2) Let them take the lead.

Rather than guiding the conversation, ask open-ended questions and find out what they're thinking and what they want to know. You might be surprised: The issues that come up for teenagers and for younger kids aren't always the same ones that adults grapple with.

(3) Use age-appropriate language.

Children and younger teens may not understand the feelings they're having or why someone around them is scared or anxious. However, they can understand the idea of two people having disagreements and struggling over something both of them want.

(4) Help them see the bigger picture.

For older adolescents, it may be helpful to understand some of the background leading up to a tragic event. Having a historical perspective can actually provide a sense of reassurance—a reminder that this too shall pass—if a child is struggling with anxiety about school shootings, war anxiety, or other types of anxiety related to tragic events.

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Stay Open and Authentic

(5) Be honest.

Teens in particular are savvy and they already know a lot about what the world is like. Don't mince words or try to sugarcoat what's happening. It's important for them to trust the adults around them and to know they can go to them for honest answers.

(6) Reassure them that they're not alone in their feelings.

Let them know that their sadness, fear, anxiety, confusion, anger—or whatever they are experiencing—is a natural reaction to a disturbing and violent situation.

(7) Share your own reaction, without going overboard.

It's okay to let teens know that you, too, find this event troubling and sad. But adults shouldn't use the discussion with their kids to process their own emotions. That may create more anxiety for the child or teen. Validation is okay; venting is not.

Follow Up Afterward

(8) Keep checking in.

Talking to teens about tragic events or their fear of war should not be a one-and-done conversation. Be sure to check in every few days to see how your teen is feeling, particularly if they are exhibiting signs of stress. Don't push them to talk if they don't want to, but make sure they know you are there for them when they do.

(9) Monitor how they're doing.

Continue to watch for physical and behavioral signs that may indicate a teen is struggling. Remember that irritability and anger may be masking feelings of fear and distress.

(10) Be present and loving.

Let them know that you are there for them, that you will always do your best to keep them safe, and that they can come to you at any time for support. Even if they don't want to talk about it, simply doing something enjoyable or comforting together can help them feel better.